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## UNIVERSITIES, COLLEGES, AND COVID-19: LESSONS LEARNED?

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For over a year, COVID-19 has re-shaped our social and economic priorities, and tested the resilience of our public institutions. The critical importance of healthcare workers and public health decision-making has never been more clear. The pandemic has also shown us gaps: the technological divides that make it difficult for many children to learn, for people to work remotely, and for many adults to find and book vaccine appointments; the inequities that continue to put frontline workers, and their communities, in more danger; and our reliance on international supply chains, including for PPE and vaccines.

[Restoring Canada's capacity to produce vaccines](#) is key to our future national security, and it is also a powerful example of why we need the research capacity and expertise to solve our own problems and support our own aspirations. As outlined in our recent report, [Investing in a Better Future: Higher Education and Post-COVID Canada](#), now is the time to strengthen post-secondary education (PSE) as a key partner in building a more equitable, sustainable, and evidence-driven future for Canada, through and beyond the pandemic.

PSE staff and faculty have stepped up to support students and communities through the pandemic, in the face of unprecedented challenges. Overall enrollments are slightly down (just [2.1% in universities](#)), despite a steep drop in international enrollments. PSE has not only maintained programming to ensure students can continue their educations but also broadened access to a wider range of students keen to learn through the long days of lockdown and other restrictions. By continuing to function at near-normal intensity, PSE has also maintained its contributions to economic activity across Canada.

Canada's high level of post-secondary participation regularly puts it at the top of OECD rankings. But this superlative educational work is built on the foundation of active research and the up-to-date expertise it supports. Colleges and universities are not just major employers, cultural centres, community resources, and vehicles for education; they are also public stockpiles of expertise and research capacity that are, like vaccines, critical to national security.

Because of these stockpiles, PSE experts and equipment have helped Canada meet the urgent demands of public policy in an emergency. They have helped corporations pivot to remote work, teachers devise remote learning strategies, and policymakers recognize and mitigate the impacts of isolation on mental health. PSE faculty have also contributed to public awareness through the media, formed new research collaborations, supported advocacy for evidence-based solutions, and served on panels advising government. There are faculty on the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, [task forces](#), and

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various expert panels, including those operating under [the Royal Society of Canada’s Task Force on COVID-19](#). Faculty are also active in their communities, from researcher-led testing efforts, [east](#) and [west](#), to [creative collaborations](#).

Still, PSE capacity may have been under-used during the crisis. Most institutions have faculty who work on designing efficient processes that might have supported vaccine rollouts, or have cultural and social expertise, including languages, that could have improved communications, tracing, and data collection. Testing, tracing, and vaccination could also be further assisted by faculty and students in healthcare programs. But can full-time students volunteer if they are working full-time to pay high tuition bills? Can faculty design a process or contribute to a communications campaign if they are teaching, from their kitchen tables, over a hundred students struggling with learning during a pandemic?

The word “resilience” is used when describing the practices, systems, and institutions needed to navigate the crises of the present to a better future. Resilience means the ability to withstand difficulty, to bend but not break; it helps us adapt without compromising the essence of who we are. Resilient people, communities, and economies require a resilient PSE sector that can stand up to today’s challenges, but that can also adjust nimbly during an emergency as it has in 2020 and 2021.

This kind of resilience teaches and demands flexibility, but flexibility has not been extended to Canada’s PSE sector in the twenty-first century. Instead, the sector has been strained, year after year, by the steady downloading of PSE costs, mostly onto the young. Colleges and universities cannot safely bend on the brittle backs of part-time, under-resourced faculty or debt-laden students, as we are already seeing in [some of our valued institutions](#). PSE needs sufficient support from governments, on terms that allow it to direct resources to stabilize research and educational programs and plan for the future.

A resilient PSE can continue to educate the current generation and help working adults re- and up-skill. A resilient PSE can also continue to support Canada as it tries to better understand and find solutions to climate change, the pandemic’s multidimensional impacts on society, post-pandemic recovery, and enduring concerns from reconciliation to inequality at home and abroad.

Declining public investment means reduced research capacity, rising personal debt, especially among our young people, and a culture of overwork and precarity that is also undermining our healthcare sector. Government funding is critical to support resilient colleges and universities so they can focus on what they do best: the education and research that will support our collective progress and our capacity to safely weather crises.

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