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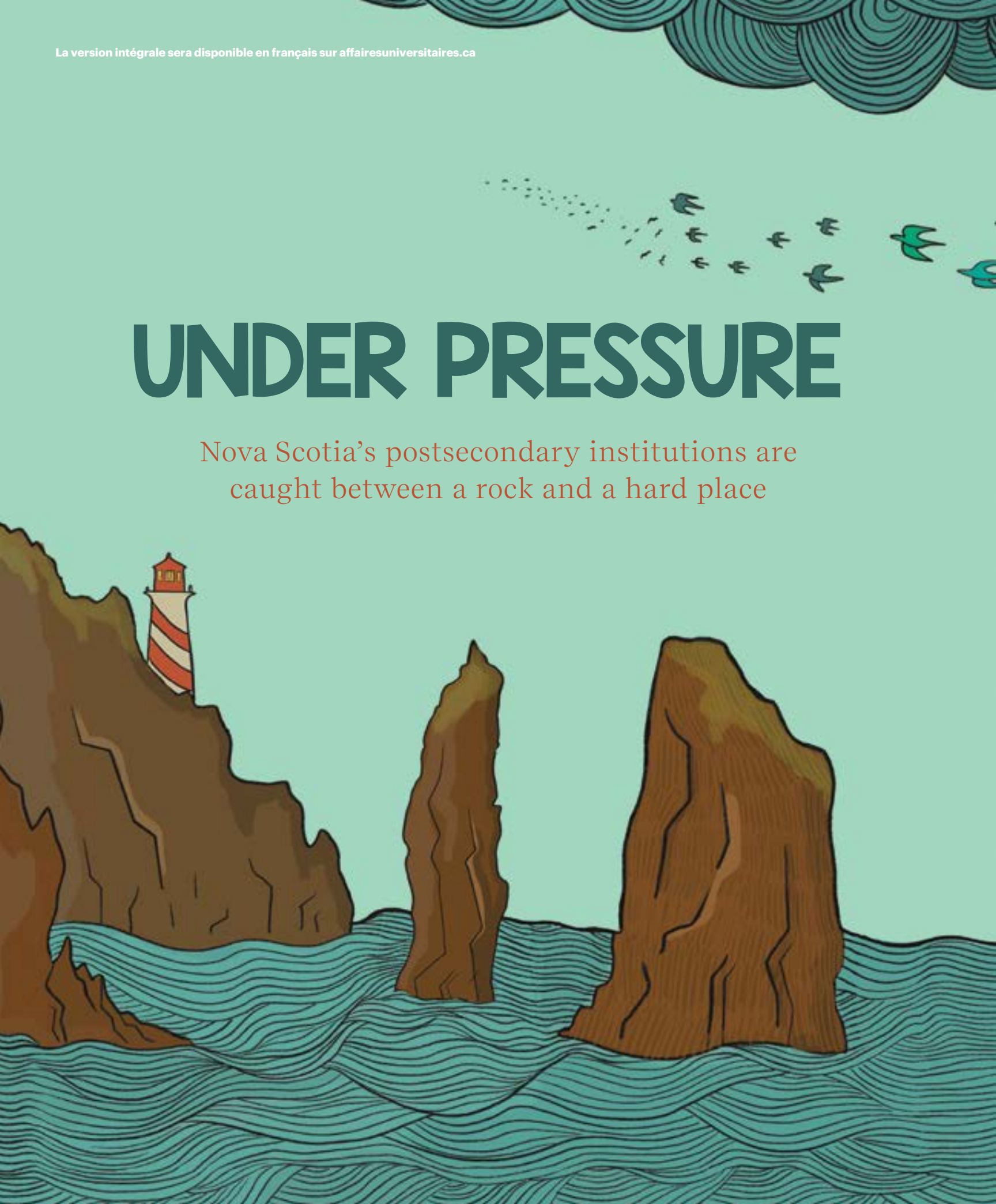
UNDER PRESSURE

Nova Scotia's postsecondary institutions are caught between a rock and a hard place



by Angela Mombourquette
illustration by Brooklin Holbrough

TIMELINE
of events

May 2015: Nova Scotia's Universities Accountability and Sustainability Act (Bill 100) comes into effect "in order to create greater accountability and sustainability." The law requires universities to be more financially accountable and responsible for setting outcomes and measuring progress. It also allows universities to restructure themselves if they are in financial trouble. The act faces opposition from students, faculty and staff and the Canadian Association of University Teachers says the act will violate constitutional rights and undermine academic freedom.

October 2018: The number of full-time visa students in Nova Scotia is 9,512.

Sept. 12, 2019: The provincial government signs a five-year memorandum of understanding with universities, covering 2019 to 2024. All parties agree to the following priorities: funding for universities; transparency and accountability; campus infrastructure renewal; maintaining and improving accessibility; tuition policy that maintains accessibility; and partnerships with Nova Scotia's Mi'kmaq and Indigenous people that work toward fulfilment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

"Welcome to Nova Scotia: your gateway to extraordinary experiences and endless opportunities!" reads the EduNova homepage. The cooperative in international student recruitment works to "champion Nova Scotia as a leader in the international student experience while advancing social and economic growth in the province." That mission – which once seemed so straightforward – has become much more challenging in the last year. So has the job of running the province's universities, thanks to changing federal and provincial government policies and a lack of consultation with administrators.

The country's second-smallest province is home to 10 universities – the highest concentration of institutions per capita in the country – and an extensive community college system consisting of 14 campuses. Of the 10 universities, six are situated in the capital city of Halifax: Dalhousie, Saint Mary's (SMU) and Mount Saint Vincent (MSVU) Universities, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University (NSCAD), Atlantic School of Theology (AST) and the University of King's College. The remainder are sprinkled throughout the province: Cape Breton University (CBU) in Sydney, St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) in Antigonish, Acadia University in Wolfville and Université Sainte-Anne in Church Point.

According to the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU), the number of full-time graduate and undergraduate students in Nova Scotia in 2024 was 44,140. An additional 11,052 students were enrolled in programs at Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC).

Those enrolment numbers are significant in a province that has a population of just over 1 million, according to Statistics Canada, and is facing demographic challenges as the populace ages and as the number of deaths outpaces the number of births. The provincial government, led by Premier Tim Houston, has been relying heavily on immigration to grow the population; between July 2022 and July 2023, Nova Scotia's population grew faster than during any other period in its history, due in large part to a sharp increase in net non-permanent residents (a large portion of whom are international students) as well as immigration and interprovincial migration. The province also has its eye on doubling the population to two million by 2060. That means the attraction and retention of students – particularly international students – plays a vital role in supporting the province's economic goals.

A deep concern

In October 2023, 14,567 international students were enrolled at Nova Scotia-based universities. But in December 2023, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), led by then-Minister Marc Miller, announced an increase of more than 100 per cent in the cost-of-living financial requirement of international students, from $10,000 to $20,635. Then, in January 2024, IRCC made a snap announcement of a 35 per cent cut in the number of international student permit applications it would allocate across the country. That announcement was followed by another in September 2024 suggesting a further 10 per cent nationwide cut was coming in 2025.

By October 2024, the number of international students enrolled at Nova Scotia universities had dropped 14.4 per cent, to 12,476, according to numbers provided by the AAU.

The federal government's moves caught universities off guard. "These policy changes were a real kick to positive trends in previous years," says Peter Halpin,

October 2019: The number of full-time visa students rises by 24.2 per cent to 11,817. The largest increases are at Cape Breton University, Mount Saint Vincent University and Université Sainte-Anne.

March 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic leads to travel restrictions.

October 2020: The number of full-time visa students declines by 10.8 per cent to 10,537. CBU and Sainte-Anne take the biggest hits.

October 2021: The number of full-time visa students stays relatively steady, with a drop of just 0.9 per cent to 10,358.

October 2022: The number of full-time visa students rises by 14.5 per cent to 11,864, nearing 2019's numbers, largely due to CBU's 67.6 per cent increase.

October 2023: The number of full-time visa students jumps by 22.7 per cent to 14,567, largely attributable to a 75 per cent increase in international student enrolment at CBU.

Dec. 7, 2023: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), led by Minister Marc Miller, announces an increase of more than 100 per cent in the cost-of-living financial requirement of international students, from $10,000 to $20,635.

Jan. 22, 2024: Marc Miller announces that the Government of Canada will set an intake cap on international student permit applications "to stabilize new growth for a period of two years." In 2024, the cap resulted in 360,000 approved study permits, a decrease of 35 per cent from 2023.

Feb. 2, 2024: Without warning, Brian Wong, Nova Scotia's minister of advanced education, announces one-year bilateral agreements with universities, replacing the previous five-year MOU. Some of the universities' operating grants will be held back until they achieve specific targets within their agreements, largely having to do with filling health education seats and creating student housing.

executive director of the AAU. "[They] have implications, not just for our universities, but for regional economy and population growth strategies."

In response, the AAU commissioned a study by Gardner Pinfold Consultants to measure the economic impact of the IRCC's cap on international students throughout the Atlantic provinces. The report found that the shortfall between actual and expected international student enrolment between 2023-24 and 2024-25 resulted in an estimated regional loss of $163 million in spending, $165 million in provincial GDP, $94 million in provincial income and 2,231 full-time equivalent jobs, in addition to a decline of $22 million in provincial tax revenues and $17 million in federal taxes lost. And with more than half of the international students in the Atlantic region, Nova Scotia is experiencing the greatest impact from the cuts.

But not all universities in Nova Scotia were affected equally. The province was tasked in 2024 with disbursing its allocation of 11,565 international study permits (out of 12,900 in total, including private colleges) among all 10 universities and NSCC. As with all provinces, international students would require a Provincial Attestation Letter (PAL) confirming that the student has a place within the province's allocation under the cap.

CBU was hardest hit. The school, which began as Xavier Junior College in 1951, became Cape Breton University in 2005. That year, the institution had 2,905 full-time students, 208 of which were international students. The number gradually rose (there were 721 visa students in 2015; 1,982 in 2018; 3,952 in 2022) until 2023, when the number ballooned to 6,939 out of a total full-time student body of 9,138. That number of students overwhelmed the small city of Sydney, which has a population of around 30,000 – putting a strain on housing and employment.

IRCC's changes meant CBU's provincial allocation of international study permits in 2024 was 5,086 – down 52 per cent from the previous year. (The actual number of international students enrolled at CBU in 2024 was 5,764, which includes returning students who did not require a provincial attestation letter to apply for a visa because they already had a study permit.)

CBU president and vice-chancellor David Dingwall declined to be interviewed for this article, but he spoke with CBC Radio's "Information Morning Cape Breton" on Jan. 2, about the impact of the international student cap. He acknowledged that CBU's enrolment needed to be reined in, pointing out that the university had developed a strategic enrolment plan before "all of this" to take total enrolment back to 7,000. Now CBU is facing a loss of around 1,200 international students, which he said amounts to "anywhere between $15 and $20 million" in lost revenue.

"I'm disappointed in the Government of Canada for the way in which they have preceded on this particular topic," he told CBC. "No consultation ever took place with universities across the country."

Université Sainte-Anne, at the other end of the province, also took a hit. In 2024, international students at the small francophone university made up 26 per cent of the 560-strong student body, based on their enrolment data.

"We're highly dependent on international students," says president and vice-chancellor Kenneth Deveau. Sainte-Anne's international recruiting efforts focus primarily on French-speaking sub-Saharan African countries. Dr. Deveau says these potential students typically face challenges in obtaining the required documentation and securing funds, which means the conversion rate – the number of students who are admitted versus the number who enrol – can be less than five per cent.

Feb 2, 2024: The Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (CONSUP) issues a statement expressing disappointment with the provincial government's lack of consultation on its one-year funding agreements. "On behalf of all university presidents, I express our disappointment that we had no opportunity to contribute to the development of the funding plan after being led to believe there would be a consultation or negotiation process," says CONSUP chair and CBU president David Dingwall.

Feb. 29, 2024: Finance Minister Allan MacMaster announces the 2024 Nova Scotia budget, with a focus on building the healthcare workforce through spending that includes: $1.8 million for the Acadia University nursing program, a satellite of CBU; $637,000 more to continue the expanded nursing training programs, as part of a four-year commitment to add 80 seats for nursing students at CBU, Dalhousie University and St. Francis Xavier University; $1.7 million more to continue supporting the expansion of 120 permanent seats and the one-time expansion of 180 seats in the Nova Scotia Community College practical nursing program.

"[Admitting] an international student is a long and cumbersome process and much more so now that these [PALs] are in place," says Dr. Deveau. "We used to admit some 2,000 students a year to get maybe 15 new students." Sainte-Anne's 2024 provincial allocation was 962, down 34 per cent from 2023. Dr. Deveau says the university admitted "somewhere around 350 students." In the end, just 146 international students enrolled.

"There's a budget impact there for us," he says. "We're looking at probably a half a million-dollar revenue hit on a $25 million budget. That's not insignificant."

Even the NSCC system is impacted. President Don Bureaux says international students in 2023 made up about 10 per cent of the student body, but the most recent federal limits will take that down to three per cent in September 2025. "It is a hit to us," he says. "It's going to hurt us financially. We're going to have to make some changes."

The long-term impacts of the IRCC policies are a major priority for the AAU across the board. "We have a deep concern that Canada's brand internationally has been badly tarnished by these IRCC policies," says Mr. Halpin, noting that the AAU made "overtures" to then-Minister Miller to propose a program that aligns with government goals while recognizing the importance of international students to the region.

Robert Summerby-Murray, outgoing president of SMU, chair of the AAU, chair of the board of directors of EduNova and vice-chair of the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (CONSUP) says recruitment has become a challenge for all of Nova Scotia's postsecondary institutions, including his own.

"People are just not applying, because the message we get from our recruiters is: Canada is not welcome to me. I will apply elsewhere," he says. "Canada was the number one destination for international students globally and we threw that away because of the miscalculation and misunderstanding on the part of the government of Canada and the lack of action on the part of our provincial governments."

Dr. Summerby-Murray says the federal government failed to understand that when it "turned the tap off" on Jan. 28, 2024, the flow could not just be "turned back on again" on March 31. "That was a gross assumption; a complete miscalculation," he says. "For many universities, and Saint Mary's is one of them, we are looking at [losing] 50 per cent of our international students."

That created a significant challenge for an institution that was already struggling with international student enrolment. In 2023, SMU faced a deficit of $9.7 million in its operating fund; by 2024, the deficit was down to $3.3 million. And in February 2025, SMU's board of governors announced Dr. Summerby-Murray was to be replaced as president by Dr. Michael Khan on July 1, 2025.

Bilateral agreements

The IRCC's policy changes weren't the only challenges that caught Nova Scotia's postsecondary sector by surprise in 2024. In early February, two weeks after the federal government's announcement of the cap on new international student study permits for Nova Scotia, then-Minister of Advanced Education Brian Wong declared that the existing five-year memorandum of understanding between the province and Nova Scotia's universi-

March 15, 2024: Nova Scotia establishes its PAL system, allocating 11,565 of its 12,900 international study permits among the region's 11 postsecondary institutions. CBU's allocation is cut by 52 per cent to its 2021 level; Sainte-Anne has its numbers cut by 34 per cent and MSVU's permit applications are capped at 44 per cent lower than its 2023 numbers.

Sept. 18, 2024: IRCC announces the likelihood of a 10 per cent further reduction in the intake cap on international student study permits for 2025 from the 2024 target of 485,000 new study permits to 437,000.

September 25, 2024: Kim Brooks, president and vice-chancellor of Dal announces through her president's message to staff that the university is immediately imposing a hiring freeze due to an $18- to $20-million budget shortfall.

October 2024: The Association of Atlantic Universities' ongoing statistics on the number of international students at Nova Scotia universities show that the overall number has dropped from October 2023 by 14.4 per cent to 12,476. The number of undergraduates fell by 16.2 per cent, from 12,079 to 10,125 – a decrease of 1,954 students.

Nov. 26, 2024: A provincial election provides incumbent premier Tim Houston's Progressive Conservative government with a supermajority in the Nova Scotia legislature. Minister of Advanced Education Brian Wong is replaced by Brendan Maguire. Mr. Maguire had been elected in 2017 and 2021 as a Liberal; on Feb. 22, 2024, he crossed the floor to join the Progressive Conservative caucus.

Jan. 24, 2025: IRCC announces its 2025 provincial and territorial allocations under the international student cap. The expected number of study permits to be issued to all PAL/TAL-required cohorts in Nova Scotia is reduced to 8,297.

ties would be replaced by separate bilateral one-year funding agreements with each of the province's 10 universities.

Universities did not see this coming. CONSUP released a statement calling the one-year funding plan "extraordinarily distressing news." Mr. Dingwall, chair of CONSUP, said in the statement that the lack of consultation or negotiation "undermines any sense of partnership, collaboration or vision for the future of one of the province's most strategically important sectors."

The agreements placed a two per cent cap on tuition increases (previously capped at three per cent) for all Nova Scotia undergraduate students, a minimum tuition increase of nine per cent for first-year international undergraduate student tuition (except for Dal and the University of King's College, because of an increase in the previous year), and tied a portion of funding to performance targets that included a requirement to fill health program seats to an average enrolment rate of at least 97 per cent. They also required universities in Halifax and Cape Breton to add more student housing options.

The province provided a two per cent increase in annual operating grants for most universities, up from one per cent in the expiring MOU signed in 2019. Dal's grant was the same as it had been in 2023-24.

"Government has successively reduced funding at the provincial level, so our base operating grants as a percentage of operating have reduced probably 10, 12 percentage points over the last decade," says Dr. Summerby-Murray. "At the same time, our costs of operating our universities – labour costs, utilities costs – continue to rise at four and a half or so per cent each year, so provincial government funding has not kept pace with that."

By September, Dal – the largest degree-granting institution in the province with more than 21,000 students in 2024 – announced it was facing a budget shortfall of $18 million and instituting a hiring freeze. In an internal memo, president and vice-chancellor Kim Brooks cited declining international enrolments though the COVID years and "the events of this past year – both geopolitical and related to changing government policy" – as factors in the university's challenges.

"The financial pressures on the postsecondary system are acute. I think those have been building up slowly over time," says Dr. Brooks in an interview. She acknowledges one way Dal has traditionally addressed those pressures has been through the admission of international students, who pay tuition as though they're not at publicly funded institutions.

Dr. Brooks doesn't see any sort of potential rescue by the provincial government in the future. "I think it is probably unrealistic for universities in this province to imagine that there is going to be a provincial government funding increase that will fix this challenge in a way that won't mean we'll have to do at least some work to think about how we design the kinds of offerings we have," she says.

Affordability

Meanwhile, postsecondary students in Nova Scotia are struggling to afford an education.

"We've had the highest tuition for domestic undergraduate students from within the province for quite some time," says G Saleski, executive director of StudentsNS, a self-described not-for-profit and non-partisan advocacy group that represents Nova Scotia postsecondary students. Domestic undergraduate

"The financial pressures on the postsecondary system are acute. I think those have been building up slowly over time."

students in Nova Scotia pay 36.5 per cent more than the national average for full-time tuition – according to data from Higher Education Strategy Associates – although the province has a tuition bursary for domestic undergraduate students amounting to $1,283 for full-time students. Dr. Summerby-Murray says CONSUP has been lobbying to see that bursary increased because it hasn't changed in about a decade.

Many areas of the province lack adequate affordable housing; campus food banks are also under growing pressure to help reduce the financial burden on students.

"When universities are struggling to keep funds coming through the door with decreased budgets from the government, it's of course students that are on the receiving end of the dollar signs going up," says Mx. Saleski.

Strategic alignment with government

Nova Scotians are also facing a growing inability to access health care, with failing health infrastructure and shortfalls in the numbers of available doctors and other healthcare workers. The provincial government's one-year bilateral agreements with universities include requirements for Acadia, CBU, Dal, MSVU and StFX to provide proof that 97 per cent of the seats in their health programs are filled in order to meet the province's payment terms and obtain a portion of their funding. All universities are also required to develop strategic alignment plans that outline how they will advance government priorities.

"I don't think it's anything new that governments would be looking for more direct outcomes – outcomes that are connected specifically to particular demand in the job market," says Dr. Summerby-Murray. "We are in a period of a greater emphasis on vocation rather than long-term education. And at the university level, we need to be cognizant of that. We need to show the link."

By late January 2025, Dal had met the requirement of reaching 97 per cent of its seat allocations in health programs and had submitted a required strategic alignment plan, triggering the release of $34 million in provincial government holdbacks, according to a more recent internal memo that was circulated. That won't relieve the budget pressures on the university entirely but has helped with the current year's shortfall; in January 2025 the school was still facing a $10 million budget deficit – the first time Dal has ended the year with a deficit since the early 2000s. (Dal's budget advisory committee requires that the operating budget must be balanced.)

MSVU's May 2024 budget showed a $200,000 shortfall, which it attributed to the province's two per cent increase to the university's operating grant "while the cost of operating the institution is rising and at a rate that outpaces the two per cent increase." The budget noted that this year's international student enrolment projections were established at the same number as last year, "as it is difficult to predict what the actual impacts of the Federal government's unexpected policy change will be."

StFX's 2024-25 budget reflects a deficit of nearly $5 million; the document pointedly says: "The government has decided to abandon the MOU process and the consultations that occurred with the university presidents. Instead, the government has mandated a one-year agreement. The terms of this agreement were not discussed with the university presidents before being presented to the public." It also notes "vulnerability around enrolment" and expresses concern that "if the target of

"These policy changes were a real kick to positive trends in previous years."

97 per cent of [nursing] enrolment is not achieved, the university will lose three per cent from the operating grant and may not get the full allotment of the nursing grant."

Surprises keep coming

The provincial government continues to spring surprises on the post-secondary sector. Since a provincial election in November 2024 that led to a supermajority for Premier Tim Houston's Progressive Conservatives, there had been little to no communication about what was coming until February 2005, when newly appointed Minister of Advanced Education Brendan Maguire, who declined to be interviewed for this story, introduced Bill 12 - An Act Respecting Advanced Education and Research. The bill would amend the University Accountability and Sustainability Act to give the minister sweeping authority over the composition of boards of governors as well as the authority to require a university experiencing financial hardship to "enter into a revitalization process" in which the province can withhold funds if the institution fails to comply. It would also give NSCC the power to grant undergraduate degrees.

The day before, the Conservatives had also introduced an omnibus bill that would have hindered the role of the auditor general. After significant public criticism, the premier backed down, and on March 4, 2025, Nova Scotia Auditor General Kim Adair released her report on funding to universities, which found that the Department of Advanced Education was not effectively monitoring or holding universities accountable for public funds amounting to more than $2.5 billion over the last five years.

And there's still no clarity on international student allocations. On Jan. 24 IRCC announced the 2025 provincial allocations under the international student cap. Nova Scotia will receive 8,297 permits. Master's and doctoral students will now also be required to submit PALs. At the time of writing, the minister had not yet allocated those permits to the universities. That uncertainty, combined with continued questions around what's coming when the current bilateral agreements expire on March 31, weighs on Peter Halpin and the members of the AAU.

"We have to be optimistic about the future," he says. "All of our universities have plans and they very much want to execute those plans, but they are publicly funded universities. And to that end, they require greater support from both the federal and provincial governments to make these plans come to fruition to the benefit of students." UA

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ONTARIO: THE NEW PRAGMATISM

After a decade marked by funding cutbacks and a tuition freeze, the province's universities face the future with an eye for opportunities

by Moira MacDonald
Illustration by Katrin Emery

All infographics based on Statistics Canada data.

THEY THREW A PARTY FOR LAURENTIAN UNIVERSITY LAST JUNE.

About 200 academic, business and political VIPs from the northern Ontario city of Sudbury raised glasses at the local reception, held in the industrial-chic headquarters of the homegrown Technica Mining company, where gold-and-white balloons rose toward the rafters. Hosted by the company's founder and CEO, Mario Grossi, and by Michael Di Brina, co-founder and president of the financial planning company Gold Leaf (both Laurentian alumni), the glittery event was a "gesture of confidence in Laurentian's future, in its leadership and its profound value to our community," said master of ceremonies David Di Brina, a managing partner at Gold Leaf and Michael's son.

The celebratory mood was a welcome change from the aura of despair that enveloped Laurentian in February 2021, when it became the first and only public university in Canada to declare insolvency under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act. The university abruptly cancelled dozens of programs, eliminated nearly a quarter of its faculty and staff, and discontinued its federation with three smaller universities, Huntington, Thornloe and Université de Sudbury. The action also led to a plunge in enrolment and a hard look not only at what had gone wrong at Laurentian — Ontario's auditor general found that ill-advised capital expansion and weak governance were mostly to blame, exacerbated by provincially mandated tuition cuts — but also what might go wrong at other universities.

Four years of painful restructuring, government intervention and leadership change later, things are turning around for the mid-sized, bilingual university. Admission confirmations from Ontario high school students in June 2025 were up more than 23 per cent over the previous year, though still lower than numbers in the late 2010s. And while Laurentian formally exited bankruptcy protection in late 2022, it was still wrapping up sales of some of its real estate to the province this past summer, intended to help pay off its creditors. Billing itself "Canada's mining university" in a city built on mineral extraction, Laurentian aims to be part of the Ontario government's ambitions to develop the province's critical minerals industry.

"We are excited about the future," says Lynn Wells, who became Laurentian's president in April 2024. "People actually stop me on the street and say, 'Hey, you're the president of Laurentian. I hear things are going really great there now.' And you know, that's an amazing feeling."

After Laurentian declared bankruptcy, the law was changed to prevent other publicly funded universities from doing the same. But that doesn't mean they haven't faced similar financial struggles. The past decade has been hard on Ontario universities: a litany of funding shortfalls, budget deficits and cuts to staff, faculty and programs. In response, the institutions have adopted survival tactics, including partnerships with industries, ambitious donor campaigns, and lobbying efforts intending to prove their worth to the provincial government.

Laurentian University president Lynn Wells chats with Michael Di Brina (right) and Mario Grossi (centre) at a June 18, 2025 reception at Technica Mining. Photo: Heidi Ulrichsen/Sudbury.com

A decade of scrimping

Ontario universities' money problems go back to at least 2017, when the provincial Liberal government effectively froze the number of domestic students for which each university would receive per-capita funding, which was also frozen. The situation worsened in 2019, when Conservative Premier Doug Ford cut tuition fees for domestic students by 10 per cent and left them there, while maintaining the funding freeze.

In 2023, a provincially appointed blue-ribbon panel found that Ontario provided its universities with only 57 per cent as much funding per student as the Canadian average. The panel's report called for an immediate five per cent tuition increase and a 10 per cent increase in base funding, with minimum two per cent increases annually for three to five years thereafter to compensate for the original cuts and for inflation. This did not happen.

Then in January 2024, amid a housing and social services crisis, the federal government cut the number of international student visas by 35 per cent, followed by another 10 per cent in 2025. The blow arguably hit Ontario hardest, with its universities facing a total $900-million revenue loss over the 2024-25 and 2025-26 academic years, estimated the Council of Ontario Universities (COU).

Some 17 out of Ontario's 24 universities are, or have been, under government-mandated third-party efficiency reviews, and many are dealing with deficits and related cuts to programs, faculty and staff. Among them, Carleton University in Ottawa projected a $32-million operating deficit for 2025-26, Queen's University in Kingston a $26.4-million deficit, and the University of Waterloo a $44-million structural operating deficit. Universities have "passed the part of scraping things off the bone to make things more efficient," says Nigmendra Narain, past president of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) and a political science lecturer at Western University in London. "We're into the hacking of the bone."

Seizing the "Canada Strong" moment

But after all the bruising and battering, universities have found ways to adapt, and some are emerging in fighting form. Amid the trade wars with the U.S., political leaders are determined to make Ontario, and Canada, less reliant on our southern neighbours. Universities argue that they can support the government's priorities through research, education and training in such areas as critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, nuclear power and life sciences.

"I think the threats from the U.S. have really galvanized business support for higher education and also have given the government a renewed sense of investing in key aspects of university activity, which is important to the talent pipeline," says Steve Orsini, COU's president and CEO. Mr. Orsini has penned joint letters with business leaders urging the province to increase

Ontario Tech nuclear engineering students in an Energy Research Centre laboratory at the university's north Oshawa location.
Photo courtesy: Ontario Tech University

financial support to universities, and big-city mayors have called on the province to implement the blue-ribbon panel's funding recommendations.

The province announced in early 2024 a $1.28-billion boost to the post-secondary sector over three years. And in spring 2025, Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security Nolan Quinn announced another $750 million a year for five years to fund 20,500 seats in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Mr. Quinn said his government was "working to protect Ontario by building a more resilient economy." Another $55.8 million was earmarked to train up to 2,600 new teachers by 2027. Base funding remains the same, though.

Among the universities capitalizing on the province's economic ambitions is Oshawa-based Ontario Tech University, an institution with some 11,000 students founded in 2003. Located near two of Ontario's three nuclear power plants, the university has been working with post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan and Alberta to help them adapt content from some of its signature nuclear engineering programs, says president Steven Murphy. He says the university has also signed IP agreements in southeast Asia and eastern Europe. "We're going great guns there," says Dr. Murphy. "It's really a phenomenal time for us."

Projecting a $3-million surplus for the coming year, Ontario Tech was among four Ontario universities that came under the auditor general's microscope in 2022 for below-average financial performance. It has since implemented some of the auditor general's recommendations and is in the process of implementing the rest, while identifying new revenue and education opportunities, such as graduate diplomas and a nuclear career accelerator program in collaboration with government, aimed at upgrading engineers and other professionals in nuclear-specific skills.

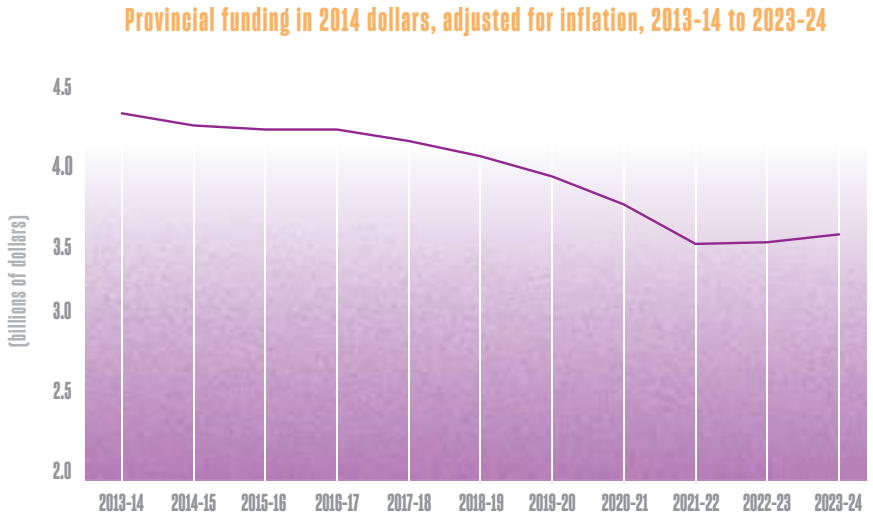
While nobody should be "thinking that universities can solve all their own problems," and they require government support for teaching and basic research, there are still opportunities for them to develop stronger partnerships with industry that can yield revenue, experiences for graduate students and a chance to share and develop research, says Alison Symington, chair of Life Sciences Ontario, an industry advocacy group. U of T's Acceleration Consortium is one example, she says, where academia, industry and government work together to develop advanced eco-friendly materials more quickly and at a lower cost.

"I'm not sure all the universities across the province have quite got their head around the institutional partnerships and what they could look like and how to make it always a win-win," says Dr. Symington.

Hard times for the humanities

In an era where government's priority is STEM, whither everything else?

Queen's University, with its $26.4-million operating deficit, has frozen hiring and is moving towards department amalgamation in its arts and



science faculty — particularly hard-hit by the loss of international students — along with bigger class sizes and elimination of small-enrolment courses. Daryn Lehoux, a philosophy professor and head of the Department of Classics and Archaeology, says small classes occur in the humanities and fine arts as well as the sciences, and he's skeptical their cancellation saves any significant money. His department managed to temporarily stave off an early 2024 faculty directive that courses with chronically fewer than 10 students would be cut, which would have eliminated most upper-year classics courses in ancient Greek and Latin — a potential death blow for the discipline. But Dr. Lehoux only has until 2027 to get the numbers over that threshold.

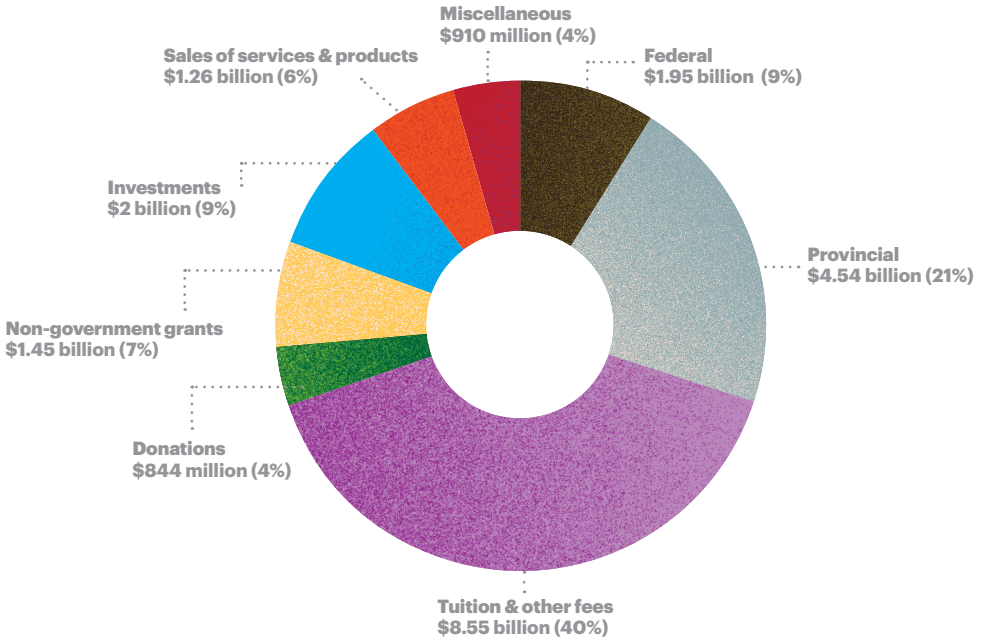
"We're still carrying on," he says. But combined with other difficulties such as marketing the classics to students with no prior experience of them, "this is a major problem ... It just feels like we keep getting kicked when we're down. The morale is terrible right now among faculty members, among staff."

Mr. Narain of OCUFA argues that even the professional programs favoured by government need a pipeline of humanities and other basic subjects to feed them. The provincial government's additional funding for teacher education is great, but, "Where do most of the teachers come from?" he says. "Well, they come from biology classes, math classes, history classes, English classes, French classes."

Many students continue to show their passion for arts and humanities. Applications to OCAD University in Toronto, with its art and design focus, were up nearly 25 percent in 2025 compared to 2024 — from 2,115 to 2,637. Huron University, a predominantly undergraduate liberal arts school affiliated with Western University in London, with an enrolment of roughly 1,700 to 2,100 students and an average class size of 30, saw a similar increase. Its president, Barry Craig, partly attributes that to students' craving for human interaction after COVID-19's grim Zoom years: "To come to a small community where your prof knows your name, where you see each other, and you have that human connection, I think that's one of the things that's drawn people to this model."

For more than a decade, Ontario governments have asserted increasing involvement in universities. Strategic mandate agreements, encouraging colleges and universities to focus on strengths and eliminate unnecessary program duplication through performance-based funding, were introduced by the Liberal government in 2014. The Conservative government went further with plans to tie a higher proportion of funding to performance on specified targets for skills and jobs outcomes and economic and community impact. That plan was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the government reduced the proportion of funding that would be tied to performance.

Ontario universities' sources of revenue 2023-24



The provincial government has also drawn complaints of interfering with university autonomy. In May 2024 it passed Bill 166, giving it authority over post-secondary institutions' policies on mental health, anti-racism and hate. Then, in May 2025, it introduced Bill 33, which directs post-secondary institutions to admit students based on "merit" and gives the province powers in the approval of student ancillary fees. Minister Quinn's press secretary, Bianca Giacoboni, said in an email that no regulations around Bill 33 will be made until sector consultations are concluded, and that it is intended to enhance transparency and trust in the post-secondary system.

French remains fragile

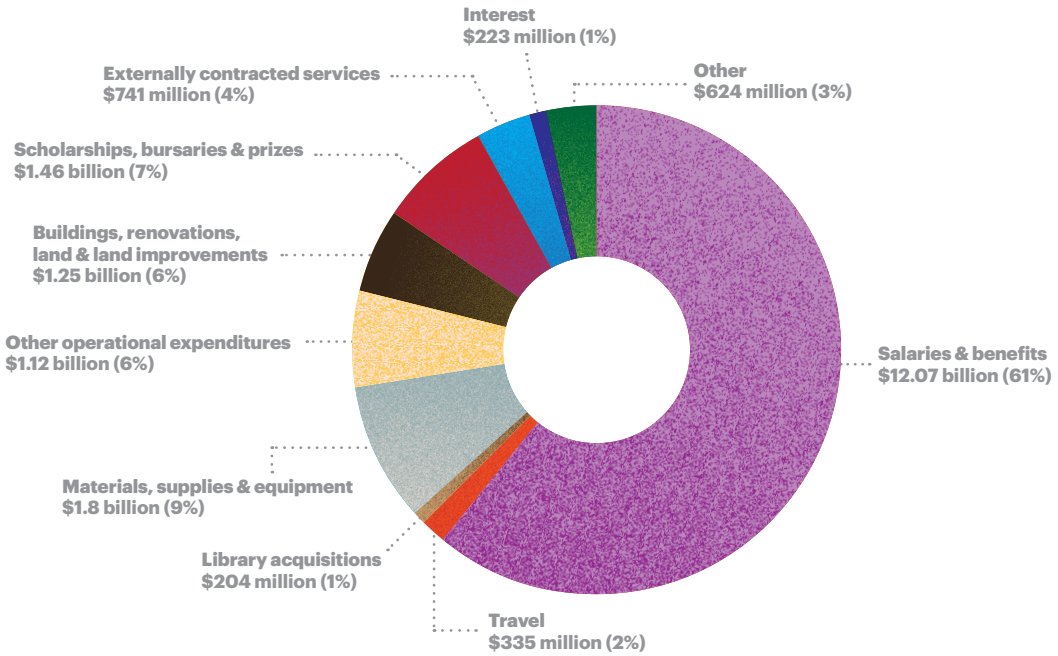
With their typically smaller classes and programs, French-language higher education institutions in Ontario have been particularly vulnerable in the current climate, especially after Laurentian declared insolvency and severed its federated relationship with Université de Sudbury and affiliate Université de Hearst. The francophone Hearst became a standalone university in 2022, Université de Sudbury struggled for provincial funding until an agreement allowed it to run French-language programs in partnership with the University of Ottawa starting in the fall of 2025 (the blue-ribbon panel recommended smaller French-language post-secondaries strike up similar partnerships to ensure their viability).

After almost failing to get off the ground when the Conservative government initially cancelled its funding in 2018, l'Université de l'Ontario français (UOF) in Toronto took in its first undergraduate students in fall 2021. Its startup has been backed with $126 million in combined provincial and federal money, spread over eight years until 2027. Its enrolment sat at 360 in 2024-25, and is expected to grow to 570 for 2025-26. The bachelor of education program is its most popular option in an era of French-language teacher shortages, with 240 new students admitted this fall. Cuts to international students, who make up 20 per cent of the student body, have created a financial challenge, says president Normand Labrie: "Two years from now, we will be funded like any other Canadian francophone university outside Quebec and the challenge will be at that time to continue the growth with resources based on current student numbers."

The way forward

Newly released data from Statistics Canada show that, in 2023-24, Ontario's funding for universities increased in real dollars for the first time in years. Adjusting for inflation, the increase amounted to 1.2 per cent, "a notable change following a decade of declines," the StatCan press release said. StatCan has not yet crunched the numbers for 2024-25, so its data doesn't include new funding in Ontario's 2025 budget.

Ontario universities' expenditures 2023-24



"At the very best you can say that the province has thrown a little bit more money at the system but it still isn't catching up with where it should be," says Glen Jones, a professor of higher education and former dean at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at U of T, in reference to the 2025 provincial budget. "There's a lot of angst and challenging political decisions that leadership at many universities are trying to navigate and there's no easy solution to it other than the notion of trying to find additional revenue, which we know is not an easy solution to find."

As Ontario universities begin the 2025-26 year with new five-year strategic management agreements, the provincial government has been reviewing its post-secondary funding model. Ms. Giacoboni of Minister Quinn's office insisted that "the tuition freeze remains fully in place," although a *Toronto Star* report suggested the government may consider lifting it. University presidents have sounded more hopeful about that, than about any serious increase in long-term base funding. Rather than relying on government, there is a sense that new models will have to come.

More collaboration among post-secondary institutions offers one way forward, suggests Dr. Wells of Laurentian. In addition to community and industry partnerships, Laurentian is partnering with local colleges and other northern Ontario universities on learning pathways and research. "I was in Western Canada for a long time," she says. "And in the West, collaboration among post-secondaries is just the way things are done. To be honest, I was surprised when I came back to Ontario after 20-plus years to find that it wasn't kind of an automatic way of doing things."

Fundraising is another important source of revenue. In 2021, U of T launched its Defy Gravity campaign, aiming to raise $4 billion for priorities such as sustainability, health, scientific discovery and entrepreneurship. That's an inspiration for Dr. Craig of Huron, as he seeks to keep offering small classes and a unique student-centred experience. "Philanthrophy has to be a part of this," he says. The university brought in a $10 million gift last winter from Fairfax Financial — headed by Prem Watsa, who has also been Huron's chancellor since 2017 — and another $5 million from the Schulich Foundation.

Fundraising on this scale is new for Huron. But, says Dr. Craig, times have changed. "I think all of us are going to be looking for more," he says. "We can say it shouldn't be that way, we shouldn't have to do it. Or, we can get on to do what we have to do." UA

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This article is available in English at universityaffairs.ca

L'enseignement supérieur québécois en zone de TURBULENCES

Pression sur l'immigration, mesures linguistiques, liberté académique et déficit de financement : les universités de la province sont fragilisées de toutes parts.

par Martine Letarte
Avec la contribution de Marie-Lou Bernatchez
Illustration par Edward Thomas Swan

Les politiques gouvernementales visant à freiner l'arrivée d'étudiantes et d'étudiants internationaux, ainsi que celle de Canadiennes et Canadiens anglophones des autres provinces, ont bel et bien produit leurs effets. Les universités québécoises paraissent soudainement moins accueillantes à l'extérieur de la province. Certaines pourraient même peiner à atteindre les quotas d'admissions qui leur ont été imposés. Cette baisse de revenus et de talents s'ajoute à un sous-financement chronique et à de récentes coupes dans l'enveloppe gouvernementale. Résultat : une tempête parfaite se déchaîne sur les universités québécoises.

« Depuis deux ans, le discours public, autant du gouvernement fédéral que provincial, a fait en sorte que le Québec n'est plus vu comme un endroit accueillant pour les étudiantes et les étudiants d'ailleurs », affirme d'emblée Christian Blanchette, président du conseil d'administration du Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire (BCI).

Ainsi, d'après les données préliminaires récoltées par le BCI pour l'ensemble des universités québécoises en date du 25 septembre 2025, la baisse des inscriptions de nouvelles étudiantes et de nouveaux étudiants provenant de l'international au premier cycle a chuté de près de 25 % par rapport à l'automne 2024.

Que s'est-il passé, exactement ? Pour diminuer la pression sur les logements, les soins de santé et d'autres services au pays, le ministère de l'Immigration, des Réfugiés et de la Citoyenneté du Canada (IRCC) a réduit de 35 % le nombre de permis d'études délivrés en 2024 par rapport à 2023, puis d'un autre 10 % pour 2025, par rapport à 2024.

Le gouvernement du Québec a aussi légiféré, mais la réduction touche essentiellement les programmes collégiaux et professionnels dont plusieurs ont été ciblés comme étant des moyens faciles et peu dispendieux de venir s'installer au Québec. Ainsi, le quota des universités québécoises a été établi par le fédéral à 63 299 demandes d'admission pour la période allant du 26 février 2025 au 26 février 2026, soit le même que pour l'année précédente. Puis, chacun des 18 établissements universitaires de la province de neuf millions de personnes s'est vu attribuer une part du quota global.

Ces nouvelles ont eu écho à l'international. « C'est venu affecter le bassin de recrutement, remarque M. Blanchette. Tellement, que si on continue comme ça, les universités québécoises n'arriveront même pas à atteindre leurs quotas. »

Au-delà des répercussions financières

Cette atteinte à la réputation de la Belle Province est loin d'entraîner seulement des conséquences financières. D'ailleurs, l'Université de Montréal (UdeM), qui a vu l'admission de nouveaux étudiants et étudiantes de l'étranger chuter cet automne de 26%, arrivera à compenser les pertes en bonne partie grâce à des inscriptions de personnes du Québec et du Canada. Il n'en demeure pas moins que c'est une très mauvaise nouvelle aux yeux du recteur, Daniel Jutras, récemment élu président d'U15 Canada qui regroupe les 15 grandes universités de recherche au pays. « Le message qui a été transmis, c'est : ne venez plus, déplore-t-il. Or, une université de classe mondiale accueille beaucoup de personnes de l'étranger. Particulièrement au deuxième et au troisième cycle. Presque la moitié de nos étudiantes et de nos étudiants au doctorat viennent de l'étranger. Ils font tourner les laboratoires. L'impact sera mesurable dans les grandes universités de recherche, parce qu'on aura de la difficulté à faire avancer les projets. »

L'avis est partagé par Graham Carr, recteur de l'Université Concordia. Son établissement est durement touché financièrement par la baisse

« En raison du contexte politique, les universités québécoises sont moins attractives. Est-ce que c'est ce que l'on souhaite, comme société, dans une perspective internationale où partout, on s'arrache les meilleurs étudiants et étudiantes ? »

des nouvelles inscriptions internationales cet automne (23%), qui s'ajoute à celle de l'an dernier, attribuable notamment aux tensions politiques entre le Canada et l'Inde. Entre 2022 et 2025, le nombre d'étudiantes et d'étudiants internationaux à Concordia a chuté de 30%.

« L'impact sur les projets de recherche sera énorme et il y aura des conséquences pas seulement pour les universités, mais aussi pour le Québec, évalue M. Carr. Tout le réseau d'innovation sera affecté parce que les talents en sont un ingrédient clé. »

Dans le réseau Université du Québec (UQ), qui compte environ 100 000 étudiantes et étudiants représentant toute la province, la baisse des nouvelles inscriptions provenant de l'international est de 30%.

« C'est fort inquiétant, affirme le président, Alexandre Cloutier. Nous sommes très loin des quotas et c'est évident que nous ne les atteindrons pas. En raison du contexte politique, les universités québécoises sont moins attractives. Est-ce que c'est ce que l'on souhaite, comme société, dans une perspective internationale où partout, on s'arrache les meilleurs étudiants et étudiantes ? »

M. Blanchette, également recteur de l'Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, a confié avoir entendu derrière des portes closes que plusieurs programmes sont menacés dans certains établissements si la baisse des inscriptions internationales se maintient. « On ne peut pas garder des programmes qui ne couvrent pas leurs frais. Il y a toujours une péréquation interne, mais elle a des limites. »

Nouvelle réglementation pour les droits de scolarité

De plus, le système régissant les droits de scolarité des personnes de l'étranger a beaucoup changé ces dernières années. En 2019, le ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur a décidé de déréglementer l'ensemble des programmes de premier cycle. En contrepartie, les universités anglophones devaient maintenir une proportion minimale de 50% d'étudiantes et d'étudiants québécois, proportion appelée à augmenter au fil des ans. Les sommes récupérées par le ministère grâce à la déréglementation étaient ensuite versées aux universités francophones et bonifiées pour soutenir leur recrutement à l'international.

« Ainsi, à partir de 2020, le nombre d'étudiantes et d'étudiants internationaux francophones a beaucoup augmenté, notamment en région dans le réseau Université du Québec et ces personnes ont amené beaucoup de richesse et de diversité dans les milieux de vie », explique Martin Maltais, professeur en financement et politiques d'éducation à l'Université du Québec à Rimouski.

Le gouvernement provincial a toutefois calculé qu'entre 2019 et 2022, les universités McGill, Concordia et Bishop's ont recueilli autour de 282 M$ de revenus supplémentaires générés par des droits de scolarité des étudiants et des étudiants internationaux sur un total de 407 M$ pour l'ensemble des établissements universitaires québécois. À l'automne 2024, le gouvernement caquiste est donc revenu à un modèle proche de celui qui existait avant la déréglementation.

Québec impose désormais un tarif plancher de 20 000 $ par inscription internationale qu'il récupère des établissements. Les plus attractifs peuvent facturer davantage et conserver la différence. En retour, environ 11 000 $ par personne sont versés pour la formation. Le reste de la cagnotte doit servir à financer des mesures qui permettront notamment de mieux soutenir le réseau francophone dans l'attraction d'étudiantes et d'étudiants internationaux afin d'atteindre un meilleur équilibre au sein du réseau.

« Or, on n'a pas vu de rééquilibrage, précise M. Blanchette. On ne sait pas où est rendu cet argent. »

« En 2024, nous avons décidé de donner, grâce à nos efforts en philanthropie, des bourses afin de montrer que les étudiantes et les étudiants du reste du Canada sont toujours les bienvenus chez nous. »

Moins d'inscriptions de Canadiens anglophones du reste du Canada

Une autre tuile est tombée sur les universités anglophones du Québec en 2023 : le gouvernement du Québec a annoncé pour 2024 une hausse des frais d'inscription des Canadiens non-résidents du Québec (CNRQ) de 33%. Ils sont donc passés de 9 000 à 12 000 $. Motifs donnés ? Ces personnes contribuent au déclin du français et la plupart quittent la province après leur formation. Du même souffle, le gouvernement caquiste a exigé que les universités anglophones mettent en place des mesures pour s'assurer que 80 % des personnes diplômées au premier cycle acquièrent un niveau intermédiaire de compétence en français pendant leur cursus. Une mesure dont la pertinence a été remise en question par plusieurs experts.

En raison de sa situation géographique et linguistique différente de celles des universités montréalaises, l'Université Bishop's, en Estrie, a été exemptée de cette hausse de frais et de la politique de francisation.

Les universités Concordia et McGill ont répliqué en poursuivant le gouvernement du Québec. La Cour supérieure leur a donné raison en avril en annulant immédiatement la politique de francisation. L'augmentation des frais d'inscription a aussi été annulée, mais demeure maintenue jusqu'en mars afin de donner le temps au gouvernement de revoir ses façons de faire.

Les répercussions ont toutefois été instantanées. « Dès que la politique a été annoncée, on a remarqué une chute quasi totale des inscriptions des CNRQ, raconte M. Carr. En 2024, nous avons décidé de donner, grâce à nos efforts en philanthropie, des bourses afin de montrer que les étudiantes et les étudiants du reste du Canada sont toujours les bienvenus chez nous. Ça a aidé les inscriptions, mais on n'est pas revenu aux chiffres d'avant. »

Un financement déjà en déclin

La baisse de revenus liée à la chute d'inscriptions venues de l'étranger et du reste du Canada est d'autant plus inquiétante qu'elle survient alors que les universités québécoises sont déjà sous-financées. Le BCI considérait en 2021, en se basant sur une étude réalisée par l'économiste Pierre Fortin, que le sous-financement de l'ensemble des universités québécoises atteignait un milliard de dollars.

Cela se reflète d'ailleurs dans les données du magazine *Maclean's* qui calcule chaque année les dépenses moyennes de fonctionnement des universités canadiennes par étudiant. Au Québec, elles avoisinaient 10 000 $ en 2014 à l'UdeM et à l'Université de Sherbrooke, toutes deux francophones. À McGill, elles dépassaient déjà 11 000 $. En comparaison, l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique (UBC) et celle de la Saskatchewan atteignaient plus de 15 000 $. Dix ans plus tard, en 2024, les deux francophones étaient à environ 12 000 $, McGill dépassait les 14 000 $, tandis qu'UBC frôlait les 20 000 $ et la Saskatchewan s'approchait des 17 000 $.

Aux yeux de Madeleine Pastinelli, présidente de la Fédération québécoise des professeures et des professeurs d'université, c'est le réel problème des universités.

« Le gouvernement québécois a gelé les droits de scolarité, un choix de société que notre fédération défend afin de favoriser un meilleur accès possible à l'enseignement supérieur, précise-t-elle. Mais, en contrepartie, il doit financer davantage les universités. Il faut faire attention, parce que sinon, on se retrouve avec un écart important entre les provinces du montant d'argent qui est disponible par étudiante ou étudiant. »

De plus, pour l'année 2025-2026, la subvention de fonctionnement du gouvernement au Québec ne couvre pas l'augmentation salariale accordée au personnel de la fonction publique. ‘

« La majorité des universités québécoises déclareront un déficit budgétaire pour l'année 2025-2026 », indique M. Blanchette.

Les établissements n'ont d'autre choix que de se serrer la ceinture. L'Université McGill annonçait au printemps qu'elle licenciera une centaine de membres de son personnel en raison d'un déficit de 45 M$ pour 2025-2026.

À l'UdeM, le déficit sera de 10 M$. Les budgets de ses facultés seront réduits de 0,5 % et celui de ses unités administratives de 1 %.

M[me] Pastinelli s'inquiète des conséquences du sous-financement. « On pourrait réduire l'offre de programmes, augmenter le ratio d'étudiantes et d'étudiants, réduire le soutien administratif dont on a besoin ! Lorsque le corps professoral se retrouve en surcharge de travail, il y a un impact sur la qualité de la formation et sur la recherche… qu'on fait déjà lorsqu'il reste du temps, souvent les dimanches soirs et pendant les vacances. »

La liberté académique renforcée

Les questions financières ne sont pas les seules à avoir secoué les universités québécoises ces dernières années. Celle de la liberté académique a aussi suscité de vives réactions, notamment après la suspension, en 2020, de la chargée de cours Verushka Lieutenant-Duval à l'Université d'Ottawa, pour avoir prononcé le mot en n dans le cadre d'un cours.

Dans la foulée, le gouvernement du Québec a mis sur pied la Commission scientifique et technique indépendante sur la reconnaissance de la liberté académique dans le milieu universitaire, présidée par Alexandre Cloutier avant son arrivée à l'UQ. Son rapport a mené à l'adoption, en 2022, de la Loi sur la liberté académique dans le milieu universitaire.

À l'UdeM, Daniel Jutras, qui est également juriste, estime que la liberté académique est une valeur fondamentale, essentielle à la fois pour

Trois piliers qui distinguent l'enseignement supérieur au Québec

Par Marie-Lou Bernatchez

Selon Olivier Bégin-Caouette, professeur agrégé à la Faculté des sciences de l'éducation de l'Université de Montréal, le Québec se démarque des autres provinces canadiennes par sa stratégie unique en matière d'enseignement supérieur. Trois éléments principaux en sont les piliers : la massification, la production de recherche et l'internationalisation.

« Dans les années 1960, le Québec affichait l'un des taux d'accès à l'université les plus faibles d'Amérique du Nord. Les universités, alors peu nombreuses et contrôlées par l'Église, offraient peu de formations scientifiques avancées. La Révolution tranquille a transformé cette réalité en rendant les universités publiques et en créant le réseau de l'Université du Québec, associé aux cégeps gratuits répartis sur tout le territoire », rappelle-t-il

La province a ensuite misé sur la synergie entre ses universités, sur l'enseignement à distance dès les années 1970 et sur la création de fonds de recherche stratégiques. Ces fonds soutiennent la relève scientifique, financent les équipes de recherche et les regroupements stratégiques et renforcent la collaboration entre les universités.
Le modèle québécois assure également une perméabilité totale: qu'un parcours soit technique ou préuniversitaire, une personne étudiante peut toujours accéder à l'université. Certains cégeps ont même établi des ententes qui réduisent d'un an la durée du baccalauréat dans certaines disciplines.

« Ces choix ont permis au Québec de rattraper son retard sur le reste du pays et d'occuper aujourd'hui une place de premier plan dans la production scientifique, explique M. Bégin-Caouette. Une réussite à laquelle contribuent largement les étudiantes et étudiants internationaux, qui représentent près de la moitié des doctorants de la province. »

En 2023, ils formaient 49 % des personnes doctorantes au Québec, contre 37 % en moyenne dans le reste du Canada. « Ces étudiants constituent aujourd'hui une part essentielle de la force scientifique québécoise», souligne le chercheur.

Enfin, l'internationalisation s'impose depuis les années 1960 comme un axe fort, grâce à des partenariats avec la France et d'autres pays francophones, ainsi qu'à la promotion de la francophonie scientifique à travers des organismes comme l'Agence universitaire de la francophonie et l'ACFAS.

« Le Québec peut s'enorgueillir d'avoir été la première juridiction au pays à avoir adopté une loi spécifiquement là-dessus. Si demain matin, le gouvernement décide d'intervenir à l'encontre de la liberté académique, les universités ont un outil qui leur permet d'aller au front. »

l'université et pour la vie démocratique d'une société. Il appelle donc à la vigilance à son égard. Toutefois, il se montrait peu favorable à l'adoption de cette loi.

« L'idée que les acteurs politiques définissent ce qu'est la liberté académique nous semblait un peu contradictoire, explique-t-il. Mais la loi a eu un effet neutre. Nous n'avions pas besoin de cette définition parce que nous en avions une. La loi a imposé aux universités de faire des rapports sur les événements liés aux violations de la liberté académique. Nous n'en avons recensé aucune. »

Même son de cloche à Concordia. « Nous n'avions pas besoin de cette loi, parce que le principe de liberté académique était déjà intégré dans les universités québécoises et géré par les conventions collectives du personnel enseignant, affirme M. Carr. À ma connaissance, il n'y a eu aucun cas chez nous. »

M. Blanchette constate aussi que le personnel enseignant était déjà généralement bien protégé par les conventions collectives. « Jusqu'à maintenant, la loi et les comités chargés de surveiller d'éventuelles atteintes à la liberté académique n'ont pas eu à intervenir, et j'en suis bien heureux. »

Il précise toutefois que les véritables menaces à la liberté académique surgissent lorsque les gouvernements tentent d'imposer leurs vues aux universités. « On n'en est pas là, dit-il, mais il y a eu des incidents. Par exemple, la nomination de la professeure [Denise Helly] au conseil d'administration de l'Institut national de la recherche scientifique a été bloquée par le gouvernement du Québec. Pour les universitaires, cela s'apparente à de l'ingérence. »

Pour Alexandre Cloutier, cette vigilance est d'autant plus nécessaire que la situation ailleurs est préoccupante. « Il n'y a pas si longtemps, c'était aux États-Unis qu'on célébrait la liberté d'expression : c'est leur premier amendement, dit-il. Maintenant, on y voit des interventions directes dans les universités pour couper du financement, pour choisir des thématiques. Le Québec peut s'enorgueillir d'avoir été la première juridiction au pays à avoir adopté une loi spécifiquement là-dessus. Si demain matin, le gouvernement décide d'intervenir à l'encontre de la liberté académique, les universités ont un outil qui leur permet d'aller au front. »

Pistes de solution

Si les débats entourant la question de la liberté académique se sont apaisés au Québec, pour le moment du moins, les autres enjeux soulevés ci-haut inquiètent au plus haut point. Certaines pistes de solutions ressortent. Pour les étudiants CNRQ, M. Carr mentionne que le gouvernement du Québec n'a pas discuté avec les universités de langue anglaise depuis le jugement afin d'arriver à une entente.

« Nous n'avons aucune idée de ce qui se passe, a-t-il précisé. Mais, c'est certain que nous espérons voir la hausse de droits de scolarité des CNRQ annulée le plus rapidement possible pour pouvoir revenir au nombre d'inscriptions d'avant. »

Pour ce qui est des quotas d'étudiantes et d'étudiants internationaux, M. Jutras est d'avis que Québec devrait repenser sa politique, notamment en excluant les étudiantes et les étudiants des cycles supérieurs parce qu'ils viennent contribuer aux activités de recherche.

Il croit aussi qu'il serait important de remettre en vigueur le Programme de l'expérience québécoise, suspendu l'automne dernier, qui facilitait l'obtention de la résidence permanente pour les gens diplômés du Québec.

« On se tire dans le pied en ce moment, comme société, en renonçant à garder ces personnes formées avec un haut niveau d'excellence. »

« Nous investissons dans la formation de ces personnes et elles obtiennent un diplôme d'une université québécoise en respectant des conditions linguistiques, dit-il. On se tire dans le pied en ce moment, comme société, en renonçant à garder ces personnes formées avec un haut niveau d'excellence. »

Pour sa part, M. Maltais croit que Québec devrait notamment envisager de recruter de façon prioritaire à l'international des francophones dans les universités de langue française, mais aussi dans celles de langue anglaise.

« Parce qu'on sait que dans une équipe de recherche, si 30 à 40% des personnes parlent anglais, toute l'équipe parlera anglais, indique-t-il. Pour que les activités se déroulent en français, il faut atteindre un seuil critique de francophones. »

Il est également évident, à ses yeux, que le financement gouvernemental des universités devra être augmenté. « Ça fait longtemps que les universités québécoises sont sous-financées et il faudra un réinvestissement majeur, affirme-t-il. La prospérité passe par l'enseignement supérieur et la recherche scientifique. Les universités vivent sur des cycles longs. Ce qui s'est passé dans la dernière année n'aura pas tant d'effets immédiats, mais on ne pourra pas continuer cette folie longtemps. »

M^me^ Pastinelli est du même avis. « Les universités ne servent pas seulement les personnes qui y travaillent et qui y étudient, dit-elle. Elles sont au service de la société et permettent l'avancement des connaissances. Cela fait qu'on peut rouler sur un pont solide, prendre un avion sécuritaire, obtenir de bons soins lorsqu'on est malade, etc. »

« C'est évident qu'investir dans les universités, c'est investir dans l'innovation et dans la création de richesse, indique M. Cloutier. Plus on soutient les universités dans leur développement, plus on contribue à la formation de la main-d'œuvre, plus on augmente le taux de diplômés universitaires, plus on s'enrichit collectivement. Plusieurs études le prouvent. »

Pour M. Blanchette, il est urgent en ce moment de changer de discours à l'international.

« Le cycle de recrutement est déjà commencé pour l'année 2026-2027 et maintenant, les universités québécoises ont vraiment besoin qu'un message d'ouverture soit envoyé afin que les gens à l'extérieur des frontières se sentent à nouveau les bienvenus. »

Nommée à la mi-septembre, la ministre de l'Enseignement supérieur, Martine Biron, a refusé de nous accorder une entrevue pour faire le point sur les différentes questions abordées dans cet article. AU

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