

Post-Secondary Education: It's worth the investment

Post-secondary education is a key to prosperity, not just for the society that is prepared to provide that education, but also for the students who are prepared to take on the opportunity for learning. For post-secondary educators that statement is more than just common sense; it is a fact that we see play out every day in our classrooms, our lecture halls, our research labs and our trades training centres. We see the transformation that happens to our students as they acquire new skills and expand the boundaries of their current knowledge and insights. But for the larger community, especially that part of it represented by the current provincial government, the concept of post-secondary education as a benefit that should be open to more students because it means greater prosperity for all of us is, at best, not warmly embraced.

Certainly for the current provincial government, post-secondary education is seen as something for which today's students should pay ever higher tuition fees to access. Unfortunately, embedded in that approach is the view that post-secondary education is more of a privilege than a basic right.

We need to set the record straight. We need to re-assert the facts about just how much today's students pay for their education and how efforts to make post-secondary education more accessible and affordable are beneficial to the broader community as well as individual students. That's one of the reasons why FPSE, in partnership with the Canadian Federation of Students, sponsored the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) to study the economic and fiscal underpinnings that finance our public post-secondary education system. The research paper that CCPA produced, [***Paid in Full: Who Pays for University Education in BC***](#), was released this week and challenges the conventional wisdom that the public heavily subsidizes post-secondary education.

The study compared students' total payments for their degrees to the cost of providing undergraduate education in BC and finds that, as a group, university students fully pay for the costs of their education (and more):

- Women with an undergraduate degree contribute, on average, \$106,000 more to the public treasury over their working careers than do women with only a high school diploma;
- Similarly, university-educated men contribute \$159,000 more to the public treasury than do men with only a high school diploma;
- In contrast, their four-year degrees cost the public treasury \$50,630.

The study also reviewed recent Canadian research and data from the 2005 Census to confirm that the economic returns to higher education in increased job skills and earning potential for graduates remain high for both men and women in virtually all fields of study. The data showed that graduates' increased lifetime earnings result in higher income tax revenues for the public treasury. These higher income tax revenues are, in effect, a form of payment students make for their education and should be recognized as such.

The study calls on the BC government to acknowledge that graduates contribute considerably more to the public treasury over their working lives than their education costs, and to rethink the current approach to financing higher education, which puts increasing pressure on individual students and their families to pay upfront through high tuition fees.

We know that the future will increasingly depend on BC's success in adapting to the challenges of a knowledge-based economy. We know as well from the provincial government's own reports that post-secondary education will be a requirement for 77% of all new jobs in our province. If we don't make the commitment now to improve access and affordability in post-secondary education, our future as a province will be undermined. The CCPA report builds the case for making that commitment. What we need now is action from the provincial government that achieves those much needed outcomes.

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