

Statement regarding PSE Funding in Nova Scotia

By DFA President-Elect David Westwood

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Post-secondary education (PSE) in Nova Scotia is heading into troubled waters. The accelerating erosion of stable, no-strings attached public funding for PSE threatens to destroy one of the strong pillars of our free and democratic society. With the astonishingly rapid rise of authoritarian, anti-democratic sentiment around the world, now is not the time to let go of our collective commitment to strong public institutions.

We are confronted with numerous large-scale technological (e.g., artificial intelligence) and ecological changes (e.g., climate change) that have the potential to dramatically alter the future of our planet. We must not turn away from or ignore these challenges, and we need new and better tools and knowledge to respond. PSE can play a key role here, but only if the sector remains healthy and sustainable.

In Canada, including Nova Scotia, public funding for post-secondary education is the responsibility of provincial governments. Strong public support for PSE makes good sense because the sector contributes in unique and important ways to the public good.

Graduates from Nova Scotia Universities and Colleges work in much-needed areas of the public and private sector, in diverse areas such as health, artificial intelligence, robotics, batteries and advanced materials, climate change, affordable housing, and business, to name but a few.

From the perspective of preparing students to enter the workforce, PSE is well-positioned to help the Provincial government deliver on its priorities and mandate, and to meet the labour needs of private-sector interests, industries, and corporations.

However, the role of PSE is not limited to meeting the needs of government and private sector interests by preparing job-ready graduates. An equally important function of PSE is to provide citizens with access to a broad education in critical thinking, knowledge, and analytical skills that are not specifically directed to any particular job or profession. It is in this realm that PSE is essential to a healthy and sustainable democratic society.

The core principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy allow academic staff and students in PSE to criticize and challenge the status quo, including the government of the day and its policies, as well as the interests and practices of private-sector corporations. PSE offers citizens the freedom and possibility to imagine and then create a better future, one that is not constrained by the status quo or that is tied exclusively to the production of job-ready graduates.

PSE requires the best and brightest academic staff who are the leaders in their fields of expertise. The teaching and scholarly research that is at the core of PSE requires world-leading facilities and infrastructure. PSE is not immune from the rising costs associated with inflation, yet public funding for PSE in Nova Scotia has not kept pace with inflation let alone expanded to account for the increasing needs for new technology and accessible spaces. At Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for instance, provincial funding has fallen to below 50% of the operating budget while the remainder comes primarily from the private tuition fees paid by students – one can scarcely consider Dalhousie to be a public institution any longer. Public funding must increase, and dramatically, if PSE is to continue fulfilling its vital and unique role in society.

Increasingly, public funds to PSE come with strings attached, as provincial governments attempt to steer institutions to meet their own mandate and priorities through threats to withhold or even reduce core funding. Institutions that are already crumbling from the lack of adequate public funding will be required to develop ‘revitalization plans’ to be approved by government officials, including – for example – outlining how they intend to produce sufficient numbers of ‘job-ready graduates’. Continued threats to further reduce or withhold core funding violate the principle of institutional autonomy that is so integral to the public value of PSE.



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At this moment in time we are witnessing a rapid and widespread upheaval of social, geopolitical, and technological norms. Public institutions are being gutted or eliminated in real time, and democratic values are under threat as power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. Post-secondary education has never been more important. Let's make sure it not only survives, but thrives.

David A. Westwood, PhD

Professor of Kinesiology, Dalhousie University

President-Elect, Dalhousie Faculty Association

Halifax, Nova Scotia