

Open Letter from Unions in Nova Scotia's Post-Secondary Education Sector

We write on behalf of a new alliance of higher-education unions in Nova Scotia, formed after the declaration of a COVID-19 pandemic. Together, we represent college and university employees across the province, both academics and staff, as well as students—all essential to the work of higher education in the province.

The COVID-19 pandemic has called attention to the urgent need to strengthen public services and infrastructure to support good health outcomes now and, later, effective social and economic recovery. Universities and colleges will play an important role in both phases across Canada.

Solutions to the pandemic—tests, treatment options, potential vaccines—will include researchers in higher education as well as the private sector. We are sustained through the pandemic by a wide range of frontline health professionals as well as many other graduates from colleges and universities, including nurses, doctors, paramedics, lab technicians, continuing care workers, and government workers across a wide range of departments.

The work of universities and colleges will be critical to the economic recovery. We welcome the support to students contained in the Government of Canada's 22 April 2020 announcement of the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB). The CESB acknowledges the imperative of supporting the continuation of students' academic pursuits.

In Nova Scotia, institutions of higher education are significant regional employers. They also bring, and will bring again, significant numbers of students into the province and continue to offer opportunities to reduce social inequality, enhance civil society, strengthen our public institutions, provide graduates for a wide range of businesses and industries, and advance the knowledge we need to protect public health and safety as well as energize our economy.

Declining levels of support to post-secondary education in this century have created an over-reliance on tuition revenues, especially international tuition fees. This solution is not available if significant drops in international enrolments are realized under continuing travel restrictions.

Yet universities and colleges are already hard at work preparing for the Fall term and the extra preparation time it will require. Fiscal uncertainty is undermining these efforts. Businesses are being given financial support to help them survive now and recover when the state of emergency is over. But no lifeline has been held out to Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions.

We urgently call on the Province of Nova Scotia, the Federal government, and university administrations to support our higher-education sector through this crisis. Help us protect our institutions, our students, and our work for Nova Scotia.

In particular, we request the following measures:

1. Reduce student tuition and increase student bursaries for the 2020/21 academic year. Many students will not be able to secure sufficient savings through summer jobs and federal income supports, and many of their families will also be under increased financial constraints. Hence, post-secondary education must be made more affordable this year.

2. Commit to no layoffs in the higher-education sector. The federal government has already committed to helping businesses by contributing a large percentage of employee salaries during this pandemic. We urge that this policy be extended to universities and colleges. Maintaining research and education infrastructure will be essential to recovery and to protecting the high quality of the student experience in 2020-21.
3. Do not allow cuts to programs and services. Even with federal and provincial assistance, post-secondary institutions may face significant deficits this coming academic year if the pandemic does not allow a full or partial reopening of campuses in September. Universities and colleges must be given sufficient support to manage this situation without any cuts to or constraints on programs and services because of interim deficits related to the impact of the pandemic.

Nova Scotia's post-secondary sector is crucial to supporting public health and the economy in the near and long term, and to helping students prepare for a rapidly changing future. Education remains the engine of innovation and ingenuity fueling our province's growth and success. It is vital that governments provide the necessary supports to maintain this sector.

Our unions stand ready to work together with our administrations and the province on finding solutions to support higher education in Nova Scotia.

Signed,

Cynthia Bruce
President, Acadia University Faculty Association (324 members)

Daniel Long
President, Association des professeurs, professeures et bibliothécaires de l'Université Sainte-Anne (43 members)

Robert Scott Stewart
President, Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers (1,400 members)

Alyda Faber
President, Atlantic School of Theology Faculty Association (11 members)

Marie Dolcetti-Koros
Treasurer, Canadian Federation of Students - Nova Scotia (representing over 10,000 students)

Karen Harper
President, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 3912 (over 2,000 members, including part-time instructors at Dalhousie University, Saint Mary's University, and Mount St. Vincent)

University; teaching assistants, markers and demonstrators at Dalhousie University; instructors at The Language Centre at Saint Mary's University)

Calvin Howley

President, Cape Breton University Faculty Association (160 members)

Julia M. Wright

President, Dalhousie Faculty Association (approx. 1,100 members)

Mathew Reichertz

President, Faculty Union of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (123 members)

Jeffrey MacLeod

President, Mount Saint Vincent Faculty Association (approx. 150 members)

Barbara Gillis

President, Nova Scotia Community College Academic Union (940 members; faculty and professional support)

Jason MacLean

President, Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (approx. 2,300 members at six universities and NSCC campuses province-wide)

Carl Mercer

President, Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union Local 18 (representing instructors and maintenance staff at CBU; 62 members)

Colleen Coffey

Regional Executive Vice-President, Public Service Alliance of Canada - Atlantic (150 members in the post-secondary sector)

Mary Oxner

President, St. Francis Xavier Association of University Teachers (405 members)

Michael Vance

President, Saint Mary's University Faculty Union (over 290 members)

Linda MacNeil

Atlantic Regional Director, UNIFOR