

A Coordinated Approach to High Quality, Affordable Post-Secondary Education

Submission to the 2026 Federal Pre-Budget Consultations

May 2026

Recommendations

1. Coordinate with provincial and territorial ministers responsible for post-secondary education on a national strategy for post-secondary education and research
2. Increase federal investment in public post-secondary education
3. Create a post-secondary education and research secretariat within the federal government
4. Accelerate the implementation of the outstanding \$1.57 billion commitment in Budget 2024 to the federal granting councils for investigator-led, open, competitive programs
5. Implement the recommendations of the *Report of the External Advisory Panel on the Creation and Dissemination of Research in French*
6. Improve student financial assistance
7. Grow capacity at public post-secondary institutions to support recent investments in apprentices and skilled trades training
8. Expand supports for Indigenous students

Context

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) represents more than 75,000 academic and professional staff at public universities and colleges across the country. CAUT works in the public interest to improve the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education and research.

Post-secondary education is essential to the advancement of quality of life in Canada. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate a rapidly changing world. It underpins learning and discovery, jobs and economic development, cultural vitality, democratic participation and social cohesion.

Yet many public universities and colleges are facing a crisis. The rapid change in federal policy on international education removed a key source of revenue with no commensurate support measures or plan for stability. Over 14,000 jobs have been lost in the post-secondary sector in the last year, hundreds of programs have been cancelled, campuses have closed and hiring freezes are commonplace. Students face rising tuition, reduced program choice, fewer campus supports and larger class sizes. These trends are eroding quality, limiting access, exacerbating affordability challenges and weakening the ability of institutions to undertake the research that drives progress.

CAUT urges the federal government to take targeted action in Budget 2026 to stabilize and strengthen Canada's public post-secondary education, research and training. These recommendations will assist in addressing pressing issues facing Canadians and accelerate research that will deliver economic, societal and health benefits.

Strengthen support for high-quality, affordable and accessible public post-secondary education and training

Recommendation 1: Coordinate with provincial and territorial ministers responsible for post-secondary education on a national strategy for post-secondary education and research

The need to stabilize and strengthen Canada's post-secondary education system has never been more urgent. For more than a decade, stagnant or declining public funding has been offset by increasing reliance on international student tuition, masking systemic funding gaps.

The rapid implementation of changes to international student policy has removed this stopgap almost overnight, resulting in widespread program cancellations, campus closures and job losses. These impacts are being felt across the country, particularly in rural and regional communities where colleges and universities serve as anchor institutions.

CAUT therefore joins calls for a minimum of \$3 billion in emergency bridge funding, negotiated with the provinces, to public colleges and universities experiencing significant financial hardship to prevent further job loss and cuts to programs and services, as a sectoral plan is developed.

As demonstrated through federal-provincial-territorial collaboration in areas such as early childhood education, housing and health care, coordinated intergovernmental action can deliver meaningful improvements. Regular structured meetings among ministers responsible for post-secondary education and research should be established to support long-term planning, workforce development and system sustainability. The federal government needs to better coordinate with the provinces and territories to ensure equality of opportunity for people in Canada and knowledge and workforce development. These discussions should support the development of a pan-Canadian framework for post-secondary education focused on affordability, quality, skills and personal development, and research capacity.

Such a framework should respect provincial jurisdiction while enabling improved coordination, data sharing and long-term planning across jurisdictions.

This plan must look at ways not only to improve affordability and quality of education for students, but also to better attract and retain talent. Public investment has supported the training of a large and highly qualified pool of researchers, with approximately 9,000 PhDs graduating every year and more than 10,000 postdoctoral fellows currently in Canada. However, growth in permanent academic positions has not kept pace. Over the past decade, the number of assistant professors — the primary entry point to academic research careers — is less than what we had 15 years ago.

Without coordinated action to support academic staff renewal and stable employment, Canada risks continued outmigration of highly trained researchers and diminished research capacity. A pan-Canadian plan for post-secondary education must therefore also include a focus on faculty and staff renewal at universities and college, in addition to ensuring affordability and access to comprehensive education and training.

Recommendation 2: Increase federal investment in public post-secondary education

Federal transfers play a critical role in supporting post-secondary education, yet the last federal base increase to the Canada Social Transfer (CST) for post-secondary education occurred nearly two decades ago, and funding has not kept pace with enrolment, inflation or GDP growth.

At minimum, the federal government should adjust the CST transfer escalator to match that of the Canada Health transfer. If the CST had an escalator to keep up with notional GDP, this would have seen the CST grow by approximately an additional \$2 billion since 2017-2018.

Recommendation 3: Create a post-secondary education and research secretariat within the federal government

Despite significant federal investments in post-secondary education through transfers, immigration, student financial assistance, research funding, and workforce programs, there is no central mechanism to coordinate these efforts. Responsibilities are distributed across multiple departments, resulting in fragmented policy development and limited strategic alignment. A federal post-secondary education and research secretariat would build policy capacity within government, improve coordination across departments, and support intergovernmental collaboration. This secretariat should also support the planned Advisory Council on Science and Innovation.

Strengthen Canada's science and research

Recommendation 4: Accelerate the implementation of the outstanding \$1.57 billion commitment in Budget 2024 to the federal granting councils for investigator-led, open, competitive programs

Budget 2025 provided \$1.7 billion to attract up to 1,000 new researchers to Canada, seizing the opportunity presented by attacks on science elsewhere. This funding built on Budget 2024 commitments to increase support for the federal granting councils and invest in graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. Taken together, these measures reflect an acknowledgement that Canada's science and research capacity depends on sustained investment in both people and the funding systems that support their work.

The federal government should accelerate the implementation of Budget 2024 commitments to better retain and support researchers already in Canada, working at institutions of all sizes. While Budget 2024 investments were largely protected during the expenditure review, their back-ended implementation delays needed research and science. Accelerating growth in Tri-Council base budgets — particularly for investigator-led, open, competitive programs across disciplines — would assist students with employment and help advance our own research and science output.

Canada does not lack talent, but it does lack research funding. Recent data indicate success rates of approximately 20% for CIHR Project Grants, 38% for SSHRC Insight Grants, and declining rates in NSERC Discovery Grants — from 67% in 2019 to closer to 58% in recent cycles. The New Frontiers in Research Fund (Exploration stream), which supports interdisciplinary and high-risk research, has had success rates of approximately 23% since its inception. These figures demonstrate that a substantial share of meritorious research cannot proceed due to insufficient funding.

Accelerating remaining Budget 2024 investments in the Tri-Councils will help fill important gaps and weaknesses in the Impact+ program. The program threatens to intensify competition within an already constrained system, concentrate scarce federal research funds in a small number of people, institutions and disciplines, and import new talent while leaving Canadian-based scientists and researchers in precarious positions. Investing in Canada's scientific community, particularly early-career researchers, should be a priority.

Recommendation 5: Implement the recommendations of the *Report of the External Advisory Panel on the Creation and Dissemination of Research in French*

Ensure academic researchers are supported and recognized for their contributions in the French language by establishing a mechanism for pan-Canadian coordination on post-secondary education in French, establishing a Secretariat for the Coordination of Research in French, and investing \$40 million per year to support the federal strategy.

Address affordability of post-secondary education

Recommendation 6: Improve student financial assistance

Affordability remains a central concern for students and their families. Considering the loss of international student revenue, some provinces are increasing tuition for domestic students, exacerbating financial pressure on learners.

The renewal of the \$4,200 maximum Canada Student Grant is welcome, but, because it is only temporary, it creates uncertainty. The value also remains well below average tuition costs.

The Canada Student Grant should be increased to \$8,000 and made permanent. At the same time, the federal government should work with the provinces to ensure post-secondary education remains affordable for students and their families.

Recommendation 7: Grow capacity at public post-secondary institutions to support recent investments in apprentices and skilled trades training

The 2026 Spring Economic Statement included additional measures to support apprentices and skilled trades training. These investments are a positive step toward reducing financial barriers and supporting workforce development.

However, financial supports alone will not resolve system bottlenecks. Many public colleges, polytechnics and union training centres already face long waitlists, instructor shortages, equipment pressures and limited training space.

Without parallel investments in public colleges and polytechnics apprenticeship completion rates will not increase. A coordinated approach linking apprenticeship and skilled trades training with institutional capacity will ensure Canadians can access training opportunities.

Recommendation 8: Expand supports for Indigenous students

Persistent gaps in post-secondary attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners reflect long-standing inequities rooted in colonial policies and chronic underfunding. Existing federal programs, including the Post-Secondary Student Support Program, remain insufficient to meet demand, leaving many eligible students without support each year.

Addressing these gaps requires sustained, distinctions-based investments that recognize the inherent and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples to

education. Increased funding is needed to expand student supports, eliminate funding backlogs, and strengthen Indigenous post-secondary institutions and community-based programming.

Action on this would align with efforts to address youth unemployment, which is acute for Indigenous youth.

Conclusion

Canada's high quality of life depends on high quality, affordable and accessible public post-secondary education and research. The current pressures facing colleges and universities are not temporary disruptions, but the result of sustained underinvestment and policy fragmentation that now require coordinated federal leadership.

These recommendations constitute strategic investments in people, aimed at improving affordability, increasing participation in education and training, leveraging existing talent to support critical research, and ensuring broad access to post-secondary education and training across Canada.



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