

Post Secondary Education

Over the past 15 years, revenue from student tuition has tripled, public student debt has ballooned (reaching \$28 billion by 2012) and working conditions for campus staff have deteriorated.

At particular risk in this context of austerity are students and workers from marginalized groups — Indigenous students, students with disabilities, racialized students, queer or trans students, international students, student parents, cleaners, food services workers and sessional instructors — who are more likely to earn lower incomes, and therefore face higher barriers to learning and working as user fees for post-secondary education go up.

There was once a time when Canadians could get a post-secondary education without upfront costs, or with nominal fees; when Canada's treaty obligations to Indigenous education were seen as a bona fide commitment and federal policy helped skilled trades apprentices find jobs or improve literacy skills. There was a time when workers in the post-secondary education sector enjoyed decent wages and full-time employment, and campus leaders were considered equal colleagues, not unapproachable executives armed with battalions of staff.

That era ended in the 1990s when tax cuts and austerity took precedence over the delivery of quality public services like education. As elsewhere, Canadian decision-makers embraced neoliberal ideas that promoted lower taxes, greater “personal responsibility” (for education, training, etc.) and the reduced scope of social programs. Post-secondary education was often framed as an individual investment, a private service for which students must bear a far higher cost. International students were aggressively recruited as a high revenue stream for colleges and universities (through differential fees), not as valued sources of knowledge.

