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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Ontario's colleges and universities are strapped for cash. A panel has wisely proposed a fix

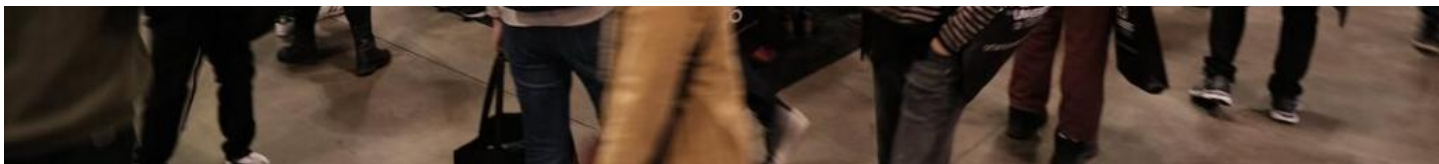
The Ontario government's lack of vision on post-secondary education does not just fail a sector. It fails the future.

By **Star Editorial Board**

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A blue-ribbon panel is recommending a tuition increases and funding hikes to help Ontario's cash-strapped post-secondary institutions.

R.J. Johnston / Toronto Star file photo

The mishandling of post-secondary education in Ontario might not be the worst of Premier Doug Ford's failures. But when the histories are written, it will likely make the short list.

A report last week on the financial sustainability of the province's universities and colleges put it starkly.

The system is "currently at serious risk and it will take concerted effort to right the ship," said a panel chaired by Alan Harrison, a former vice-principal of Queen's University.

The committee was struck in March, a time-buying exercise prompted by the financial crisis at Laurentian University, investigations by the auditor general expressing sustainability concerns, and recent reports revealing Ontario's overwhelming reliance on international students for college and university funding.

As the Harrison committee makes clear, the crisis rests in large part at the premier's door.

Shortly after taking office in 2018, the Ford government cut tuition by 10 per cent and has frozen rates since — a period during which inflation has risen an estimated 15 per cent.

That tuition freeze, though useful populist politics, put in place of chain of effects that demonstrated once again the complexity of governing and the inter-connectedness of all things.

It obliged colleges and universities to find funding elsewhere. They did, in the form of international students.

The influx of those students inflamed the housing crisis, creating challenges for municipalities, and put pressures on Canada's immigration system.

On the Star's op-ed page Tuesday, vice-chancellors from Wilfrid Laurier and Guelph universities said inadequate post-secondary funding, in fact, undercuts communities and "jeopardizes the prosperity of Ontario."

The Harrison panel produced a set of recommendations that a reasonably informed observer — noting Ontario's per capita funding for college students is 44 per cent paid by the rest of Canada, and for university students 57 per cent — could easily have submitted years ago.

It said direct provincial support for colleges and universities — both in providing more money per student and admitting more students — needs to be increased.

It recommended a one-time funding hike of about 10 per cent by the province, with increases of at least two per cent (tied to inflation) in subsequent years. It said tuitions should be allowed to rise by five per cent in 2024-25, but there should also be an increase to OSAP and student aid. It said Ontario's reliance on international students to fund the system is also a financial risk that must be addressed.

A recent report, The State of Post-Secondary Education in Canada 2023, found that international students from India alone contributed twice the amount to Ontario's college system as Canadian students do and contribute more than the Ontario government.

Ontario has 23 publicly assisted universities — a third of which are running deficits — and 24 colleges.

The provincial government apparently hoped to squeeze greater efficiencies out of institutions by starving them of funds.

“No province has under-funded the post-secondary sector more,” said the 2023 report. “It is tenth out of 10 in every inter-provincial comparison of financing.”

Ontario's record, it said, was “abysmal.”

It's a truism that teams and organizations reflect the traits and values of their leaders. Here, the funding squeeze of the province's post-secondary institutions sends the clear signal that expertise and academic credentials are not held in high regard, their economic contributions not understood. But in a global knowledge economy, such an attitude was foolishness on stilts.

The panel went out of its way to praise faculty, noting that salary and benefit costs in Ontario's universities are, per full-

time equivalent student, among the lowest of any province.

And as the report said, all organizations that made submissions “emphasized the value of post-secondary education in creating and maintaining a highly qualified and relevant talent pipeline in Ontario.”

As has become obvious, the government’s lack of vision on this file does not just fail a sector. It fails the future.



It's past time to right the ship.

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