



As Ontario struggles to address the serious shortage of qualified workers, the government is turning to public colleges for solutions. Nevertheless, government continues to cut funding to these same institutions even as there is increasing pressure to increase and enhance the quality programs at Ontario's colleges.

It's expected the impending blue-ribbon panel on post-secondary education will conduct a comprehensive examination of the long-term challenges facing the sector. In the interim, the government can address the most immediate pressures in its upcoming spring budget.

Tuition

It's time to end the ongoing freeze on college tuition after it was cut by 10 per cent four years ago and has since remained frozen.

The freeze on the reduced tuition puts unnecessary strain on college budgets with no corresponding benefits for students.

Contrary to popular opinion, college tuition in Ontario is actually the second lowest in Canada. The average tuition of \$2,726 per full-time equivalent student is 26 per cent below the Canadian average and only half the average tuition in Alberta.

College tuition was very affordable before the tuition was cut. The cut plays no role in students' decisions about going to college, particularly with the numerous supports available for low-income students. College education is and will remain affordable and accessible without the tuition cut and ongoing freeze.

Ending the freeze on college tuition in Ontario and allowing tuition to rise at a reasonable rate going forward will generate more revenue to help sustain the high-quality programs that prepare students for rewarding careers.

The 2023 Ontario Budget should announce an immediate end to the tuition freeze and authorize colleges to increase tuition by as much as five per cent in 2023-24.

International student fee recovery

The previous Liberal government introduced the international student fee recovery (ISR) 10 years ago to offset funding provided for operating grants. The government subtracts its portion of international tuition from the operating grants provided to colleges.

Over eight years, the ISR has saved the province \$465 million in government funding to public colleges.

This constitutes an inappropriate use of international tuition. The fees students pay for their college education should go towards college programs and support for international students rather than the government's bottom line.

In its 2023 budget, the government should reassess the ISR policy.

Inflation

Ontario colleges are not immune to rising inflation. Back in December 2021, auditor general Bonnie Lysyk said in her annual report that the colleges' fiscal situation is "risky." The fiscal pressures intensified last year as inflation sent prices soaring across the globe.

The government should account for inflation when it sets the operating grants to colleges for 2023-24. This should include the increasing costs for capital costs and the digital transformation of higher education.

If Ontario is to continue to have the best educated population in the OECD to be well positioned to meet the needs of a labour market reliant on advanced skills, the government must invest in public colleges. With that critical support, students, employers and the province can look to the future of work in Ontario with confidence.