

Public Post-Secondary Funding Review

Vancouver Island University Students' Union

BC Federation of Students, Local 13

July 15, 2022

A Community in Need: VIUSU's vision for meaningful change

This submission has been compiled by the VIU Students' Union (VIUSU). The Students' Union represents close to 10,000 students on Vancouver Island on 4 campuses and centres for over 50 years. We are committed to achieving the goal of a system of post-secondary education which is accessible to all, which is of high quality, and which is rationally planned; which recognises the legitimacy of student representation and the validity of students' rights; and whose role in society is clearly recognised and appreciated.

However, there is a problem in the sector: institutional funding. Between 2000 and 2016, the proportion of provincial funding decreased by 24% in BCⁱ and as a result institutions have looked to students to fill the gaps in their budgets. In the last 50 years, the proportion of public funding to BC colleges and universities has dropped to 43.6% of total operating revenue;ⁱⁱ down from more than 80% in the 1980s and more than 90% in the 1970s.ⁱⁱⁱ This constitutes a massive divestment in public education for the current generation of young people compared to the support provided to those who attended college and university in past decades.

This funding review is an excellent step in the right direction in terms of addressing the funding issue by ensuring we have a funding model that is fairly and impartially distributed across the province. We appreciate that the letter identifies that the method of calculating grants over the years has been adhoc. That is certainly how it feels when the funding allotment to VIU is presented in the budget each year.

The Crux of the Matter: building blocks on the backs of students

Public Post-Secondary is intended to be publicly funded, however VIU's government grant funding only makes up only 41.7% of the institutions total operating budget. One of the most worrisome ways that VIU has filled these gaps over the years is the use of international student fees, which now make up 16.7% of VIU's operating budget. This means almost a fifth of the operating budget is not tied to a stable or predictable source of revenue.

Provincially, over the last decade, international enrolment has tripled and accounted for almost 58% of program growth, compared to the 10% increase in enrolment numbers of domestic students. In the event of natural disasters, geo-political conflicts, or other forces outside our control, institutional over-reliance on international tuition revenue is a critical weakness in BC's post-secondary sector. The pandemic gave all of us first hand insight into how devastated the budgets of our post-secondary institutions can become, when international students cannot study as intended, in BC.

Our vision of post-secondary education: fair, equitable, transparent and sustainable

As part of the BC Federation of Students, VIUSU wants to achieve a system of post-secondary education that is equitably funded.

Vancouver Island University has been forced to make choices that will encourage enrollment and decrease costs above all else, which means we have seen:

- Over promotion of ‘trendy’ programs like business degrees over less desirable but still important programming
- Use of unscrupulous recruiters to attract international students by any means necessary
- Lack of support for departments that are less ‘profitable’ for the institution
- Increased reliance on revenue from international student
- Continual deferral of maintenance, infrastructure upgrades, and program or software updates to balance the budget
- Insufficient services to support the needs of students
- Cutting of course offerings, service hours, service provision and supports on campus

In our view, institutions in the post-secondary education system would be more cooperative than competitive by sharing more resources. Redistribution of the total funding allocation will not solve all the problems, but it is a very important step in the next evolution of the world class system of post-secondary education we have today in British Columbia.

All in all, our view of the system is that there is a requirement for sustainable, predictable, and reliable funding that is regularly reviewed to ensure its meeting the needs of students. British Columbia provides exceptional post secondary education and significant investments have been made by government to ensure increasing access to education for all those who need it. However, it is now time for our funding model to be fixed so that we can continue building a system that works for everyone. Education is a crucial component to a happy and healthy community, society, and economy which needs to be prioritized appropriately.

Our vision for post-secondary would include a system that is rationally funded, with a funding model that aims to distribute resources considering an institutions regionality, mandate, course offerings, and student demographic. A re-distribution of resources would recognize the many contributions VIU makes to the community. It will allow them to not only continue on a more stable basis, but to grow in the future and provide the access the community needs.

VIU's contributions to BC: an essential resource

British Columbians need more loans, better supports, and regulation of international tuition. We need more funding and we need more grants. Our issues are not just those on-campus but also housing and access to mental health supports.

VIU provides a service to the central and rural island communities, by providing access to education within their local communities as a commuter campus for many students. However, institutions are doing a disservice to students by luring them to programming designed for under-privileged groups that require access, without providing acceptable supports to ensure students are able to thrive in the post-secondary environment. VIU is an open access institution, and our student body is diverse, often entering into the classroom as a first-generation learner, without the knowledge and skills that instructors and faculty expect. The shortfall in student support services means that students are granted access to post-secondary but provided insufficient supports to be successful. The institution has not been granted the kind of recognition of its fullness as a university and the service it provides to the island despite its service to the community as an accessible option, allowing people to stay in their home communities with supports and resources and be able to give back locally. Many students at VIU wouldn't be able to study in post secondary if it required relocating from family, jobs, or supports they rely on within their home base.

The pandemic has highlighted more than ever, the gaps in services available to students. It's an unprecedented time in terms of cost of housing, mental health, pressures on students, isolation and impact to mental wellness. In our students' union, where students once came with a singular issue, they now come for support with a multitude of serious issues. VIU has experienced extremes of these impacts, with students living in the Library or their cars, severely struggling with access to housing. We believe more funding that is equitably distributed across the province, would help alleviate some of the financial burdens institutions, and thus students face as barriers to successful post secondary education.