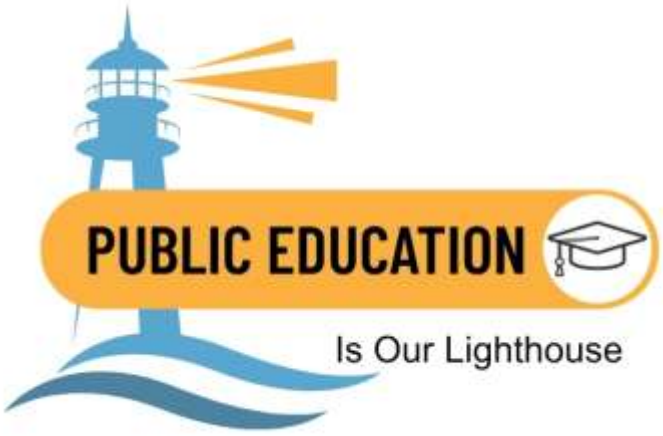
The Value of Post Secondary Education in Nova Scotia

September 2026



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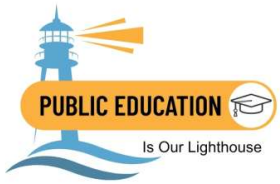

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The Value of Post Secondary Education in Nova Scotia

Public colleges and universities are essential to Nova Scotia. Like a lighthouse, they are a beacon for our communities, guiding us toward opportunity, resilience and long-term prosperity. They also protect us - increasing our sovereignty through home-grown talent and innovation.

Nova Scotians are proud of their colleges and universities. Well-known as centres of teaching, research and discovery, they drive innovation and knowledge, attract talent and investment, and challenge us to think bigger. They are also vital economic assets. They train our future workforce and provide research and knowledge capacity that provides an economic value considerably larger than its direct economic footprint. Our universities and colleges makes life better for Nova Scotians, and that matters.

Recognizing the economic value of academia reinforces why strong, diverse and well-supported universities are an investment in Nova Scotia's future. That economic contribution extends beyond individual campuses and communities, with benefits that can be measured through regional, provincial, national and international lenses. The export of education and research services, and goods and services provided to students and research organizations position post-secondary education as a significant economic driver, competing for students, talent, partnerships and research funding in national and international markets (Gardner-Pinfold, 2023).

Economic Value: Provincial

Student Enrolment

With 10 universities and 14 community college campuses, Nova Scotia has the most full-time students per capita of any province. In 2022, that equaled one full-time student for every 24 Nova Scotians. This enhances our social and cultural value, but also provides economic benefit.

Table 1 offers a breakdown of student enrolments by place of origin for 2022/23, as that is the most recent year for which spending and export data is also available. The percentage of students from within Nova Scotia, and the total of enrolments of all students from outside of Nova Scotia is included.

Table 1

Number of students enrolled at NS universities & colleges - by place of origin, 2022/2023

Type of PSE	Year	Students from Nova Scotia	% of Students from Nova Scotia	Students from Other Atlantic Provinces	Students from Other Canadian Provinces	International Students	% of Students from Outside Nova Scotia	Total Students Enrolled
Universities	2022/23	21,594	44.7%	4,101	9,740	12,903	55.3%	48,338
Community Colleges	2022/23	9,288	88.7%	NA	250	935	11.3%	10,473
Total	**2022/23**	**30,882**	**52.5%**	**4,101**	**9,990**	**13,838**	**40.5%**	**58,811**

Source: Province of Nova Scotia, 2026

Using the same data, Table 2 shows the percentage of students from Nova Scotia, other Atlantic provinces, other Canadian provinces, and international students, for 2022/23.

Table 2

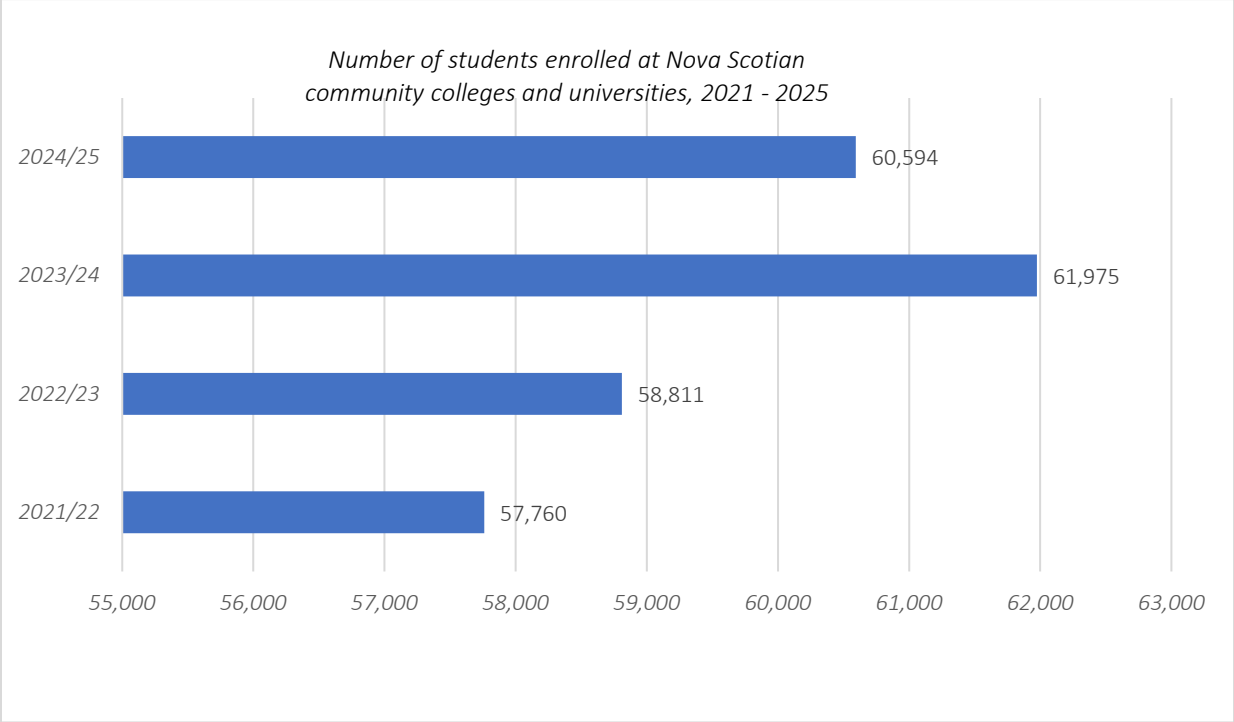
Percentage of students enrolled at NS universities & colleges - by place of origin, 2022/2023

Type of PSE	Year	% of Students from Nova Scotia	Students from Other Atlantic Provinces	Students from Other Canadian Provinces	% of International Students	Total Students Enrolled
Universities	2022/23	44.7%	8.5%	20.1%	26.7%	48,338
Community Colleges	2022/23	88.7%	NA	2.4%	8.9%	10,473
Total	**2022/23**	**52.5%**	**7%**	**17%**	**23.5%**	**58,811**

Source: Province of Nova Scotia, 2026

Chart 1 shows the total number of students enrolled at community colleges and universities, by year, to show the increase from 2021/22, to 2024/25. The decrease between 2023/24 and 2024/25 can be largely attributed to the decrease in international student enrolment.

Chart 1



Source: Province of Nova Scotia, 2026

Student Spending

Table 3 shows university student spending, by place of origin, for 2022/23. To calculate the economic export value that universities bring to Nova Scotia, Gardner Pinfold (2023) looked specifically at the spending of students from outside of Nova Scotia. The study included university student spending only, using average costs for a range of tuition, residence and meal plan costs. The calculation also included other living expenses, and visitor spending. Visitor spending includes family and friends who may travel to the province with the student, or attend events such as athletics, performances, or graduations. Note, that data on student spending and economic impact for community colleges is limited, so some of the data reflects university impact only.

Table 3

University student spending, by place of origin, 2022/23

	Other Atlantic Provinces	Other Canadian Provinces	International	Total
University Enrolments	4,101	9,740	12,903	26,744
Average annual university spending per student	$42,063	$45,652	$56,705	
Total university spending per student	**$172,498,840**	**$444,653,700**	**$731,665,125**	**$1,348,817,660**
Percentage of Total Spending	**12.8%**	**33%**	**54.2%**	

Source: Gardner Pinfold, 2023 & Province of Nova Scotia, 2026

To estimate student spending for community colleges, the average spending per university student was determined for each category (total spending per student/number of students). Average university tuition, was replaced with average community college tuition. Living expenses and other spending was assumed to be similar to that of university students. Using this formula, the average student spending for Canadian and International students was multiplied by the number of students enrolled to estimate that community college students from out of province spent almost $50 million in 2022/23.

Table 4

Community college student spending, by place of origin, 2022/23, estimated

	Other Atlantic Provinces	Other Canadian Provinces	International	Total
Community college enrolments	NA	250	935	1,185
Estimated average annual community college spending per student	NA	$39,482	$40,199	
Total community college student spending (estimated)	**NA**	**$9,870,500**	**$37,586,065**	**$47,456,565**
Percentage of Total Spending		**20.7%**	**79.3%**	

Source: Estimate

Table 5 combines university student spending with the estimated community college student spending, to determine total out of province student spending of almost $1.4 billion.

Table 5

*University and community college student spending, by place of origin, 2022/23, **estimated***

	Other Atlantic Provinces	Other Canadian Provinces	International	Total
Total university student spending	$172,498,840	$444,653,700	$731,665,125	$1,348,817,660
Estimated total community college student spending	NA	$9,870,500	$37,586,065	$47,456,565
Estimated TOTAL university and community college spending	**$172,498,840**	**$454,524,200**	**$769,251,190**	**$1,396,274,225**

Source: Gardner Pinfold, Province of Nova Scotia, Estimate

University and College Spending

The payroll alone makes universities and colleges strong economic drivers – as employees spend, save and invest those dollars back into their communities. Many university faculty and staff are unionized, which leads to better wages and working conditions – increasing the employees' contribution to economic growth. Universities and colleges in Nova Scotia paid $1.19 billion in salaries and wages in 2024, as detailed in Table 6.

Table 6

Total number of jobs and compensation at colleges and universities in Nova Scotia, 2022-2024

	Total Number of Jobs			Total Compensation for All Jobs		
	2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024
Community Colleges	2,540	2,720	2,935	$183,575	$200,368	$226,721
Universities	14,345	15,285	14,640	$864,323	$949,535	$967,356
Total	**16,885**	**18,005**	**17,575**	**$1,047,898**	**$1,149,903**	**$1,194,077**

Source: Statistics Canada

In addition to payroll, universities buy goods and services, creating demand in other industries, like construction, transportation, food, energy and professional services (CCPA). There is room for growth. Even a 10% shift in institutional purchasing toward local suppliers can produce meaningful benefits for local and regional economies (Cervelli & Horsnell, 2021).

Table 7

Goods and services purchased in Nova Scotia, by universities and colleges in 2022 at basic prices

Area	Colleges	Universities	Total- 2022
Nova Scotia	$59.7M	$497.7M	$557.5M

Source: CCPA, 2026

Research Spending and Investment

The framework is already in place. In Nova Scotia, 56.9% of the total funding sources for research were provided through universities and colleges, through a combination of general university funds, and their own revenue sources (Statistics Canada). Provincial investment in universities creates institutional capacity that enables Nova Scotia researchers to attract additional research dollars into the province. Research grants totaling $148 million flowed through NS universities from research organizations such as CIHR, NSERC, CFI, CFREF and SSHRC (Gardner-Pinfold, 2023). The figure is included in the direct output spending in Table 9. Table 8 shows a breakdown of the funding sources for research and development in Nova Scotia's higher education sector, including $317 million generated by higher education through their own funding sources, and from general university funds.

Table 8

Sources of funds for expenditures on research and development (R&D) in the higher education sector (x 1,000,000), Nova Scotia, 2022

		2022
Nova Scotia	Total, all sectors	$557M
	Business enterprise	$28M
	Federal government	$148M
	Provincial governments	$21M
	Private non-profit	$41M
	Foreign Sources	$3M
	Higher Education	$317M
	• From own revenue sources	NA
	• From general university funds	NA

Source: Statistics Canada, Table 27-10-0363-01

Universities with the institutional capacity to pursue a diverse portfolio of teaching and research can provide Nova Scotia with greater long-term economic value than those limited to the government's current economic priorities. While Nova Scotia lacks a provincial Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) policy, Isnor (2022) says that developing a strong, central policy can help Nova Scotia capitalize on its considerable university and research capacity by

connecting research, knowledge and highly qualified people with the province's economic and social priorities. Universities are central to this system, providing the research capacity, expertise and intellectual diversity needed to generate new knowledge and respond to emerging challenges. By supporting a strong and diverse university research ecosystem—rather than focusing only on predetermined or immediately commercial outcomes—Nova Scotia can create the conditions for innovation, economic development and stronger communities across the province.

Economic Impact

The $1.49 billion in spending generated by students and university research flowed directly to universities and businesses throughout Nova Scotia, while also creating a significant ripple effect across the economy. This activity generated an additional $398 million in indirect, or supply-chain spending, and $414 million in spending as workers used their wages and salaries in local economies, for total spending power of $2.3 billion. Altogether, university-related spending activity contributed approximately $1.5 billion to Nova Scotia's GDP, supported an estimated 23,700 full-time equivalent jobs, and generated more than $361 million in provincial and federal tax revenues back into the economy.

Table 9

Economic impacts of NS universities exports, 2022/23

($000s)	Direct	Indirect	Induced	Nova Scotia	Canada
Output	$1,498,051	$398,111	$414,282	$2,310,444	$2,884,205
GDP	$1,014,599	$219,094	$268,510	$1,502,203	$1,788,598
Income	$627,864	$128,336	$107,738	$863,939	$1,023,316
Jobs (FTE)	15,775	2,696	2,524	20,996	23,697
Provincial Taxes	$118,424	$25,329	$60,927	$204,679	
Federal Taxes	$104,452	$17,668	$32,565	$154,684	$156,556

Source: Statistics Canada interprovincial input-output economic model, 2019 (Garner-Pinfold)

Export Value

When compared to other top Nova Scotia exporters, universities ranked first in the list of top 10 exporters in 2022. Universities and colleges contributed over $1.5 billion in export value, as illustrated in Table 10.

Table 10

NS Universities compared to other top 10 exporters, 2022

Rank	Industry	Exports $000s	Exports $000s (incl community colleges)
1	Universities	$1,498,051	$1,545,474,225
2	Seafood Product Preparation & Packaging	$1,298,960	
3	Fishing	$1,269,876	
4	Tire manufacturing	$1,191,275	
5	Paper Mills	$294,685	
6	Sawmills & Wood Preservation	$240,640	
7	Frozen Food Manufacturing	$232,782	
8	Navigational Instruments Manufacturing	$138,389	
9	Recyclable Metal Merchant Wholesalers	$128,722	
10	Laminated Plastic Manufacturing	$102,814	

Source: Gardner Pinfold (2023); Estimate

University Funding

To understand the economic impact and export value of post-secondary education, it is important to consider the investment in Nova Scotia's universities. In 2022/23, provincial operating grants totaled $590 million, representing 32.5% of university revenues.

Table 11

Revenue of universities by type of revenues and funds in current Canadian dollars (x 1,000) and percentage, Nova Scotia, 2022/23

Types of revenues	*2022 / 2023*	*Percentage*
Federal (Research Grants)	$155,572	8.57%
Provincial (Operating Grants)	$590,263	32.5%
Municipal	$736	0.04%
Other provinces	$10,727	0.59%
Foreign	$3,890	0.21%
Tuition and other fees	$603,920	33.26%
Total donations	$66,311	3.65%
Total grants	$70,641	3.89%
Investment	$81,859	4.51%
Other types of revenues	$231,844	12.77%
Total revenues	$1,815,763	100.0%

Source: Statistics Canada, Table 37-10-0110-01, Table: 37-10-0026-01

Graduates

If universities generate knowledge, then the 'product' of that knowledge is the students that graduate from the many programs offered. The Maritime Province Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) conducts regular surveys of Nova Scotia university students to follow their progress two and six years after graduation. Table 12 provides data on graduates from 2018.

Table 12

Employment Profile of University First-Degree Holders Two and Six Years After Graduation, Nova Scotia & Canada

	Nova Scotia		Canada	
	Class of 2018		Class of 2018	
	In 2020	In 2024	In 2020	In 2024
% Employed	87%	95%	85%	92%
% Full-time employed	80%	90%	81%	89%
Job requires university education / management	58%	69%	65%	70%
Earnings (median)	$51,600	$70,000	$58,700	$75,700
Full-time earnings (median)	$56,300	$72,000	$64,600	$80,000

Source: MPHEC Graduate Student Profile, 2026

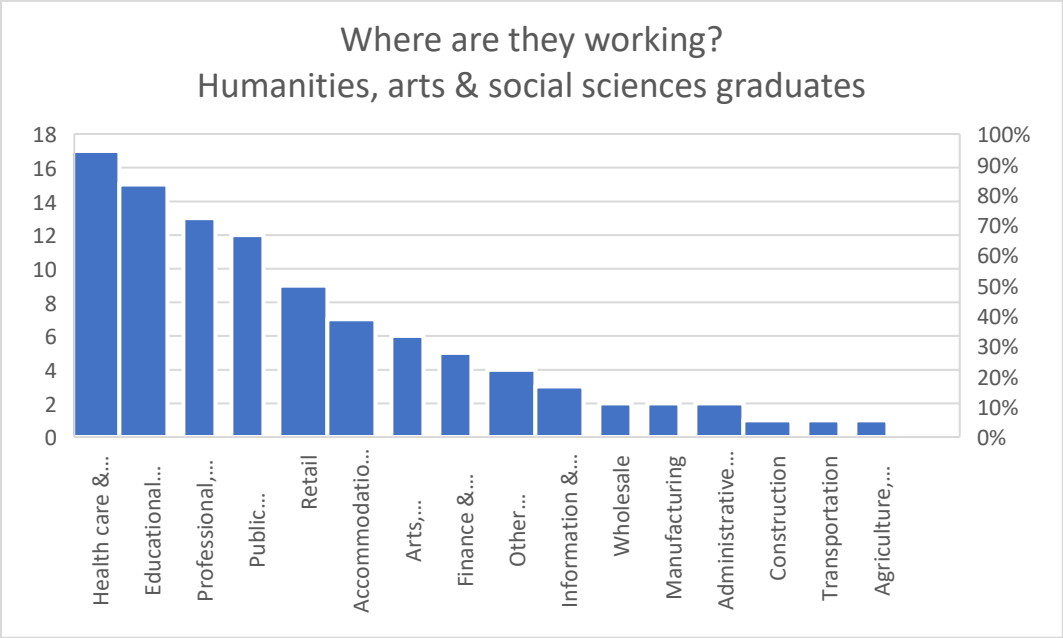
A university degree does not lead to just one occupation or industry. Data on employment by industry sector assembled by the MPHEC, show that university graduates from the Maritime provinces are employed across a wide range of sectors as early as two years after graduation. While some professional programs have a direct connection to particular industries—for example, education and health—graduates of more general programs are distributed across many different sectors.

This is particularly important when considering the value of degrees in liberal arts and sciences. Rather than preparing graduates for a single, predetermined job, these degrees provide knowledge and transferable skills that can open doors to opportunities across sectors. The diversity of employment destinations demonstrates that the value of a degree should not be measured solely by whether it leads directly from a particular program to a particular occupation: graduates can apply their education in multiple industries and adapt as opportunities and workforce needs change.

Universities and colleges educate nurses, teachers, social workers, scientists, engineers, business leaders, artists, public servants and other professionals. But their contribution

continues after graduation through research, public engagement, professional expertise and community partnerships (Isnor, 2022).

Chart 2



Source: MPHEC, 2022

Perceived Value

Nova Scotians understand the value that universities and colleges provide. A recent poll by CAUT asked respondents across Canada how they perceive the economic contribution post-secondary education has on towns, regions, provinces, and the country. Table 13 highlights the poll results, with 59% of Nova Scotians indicating that universities and colleges have a large, positive economic impact on the province, and 71% in cities and towns where institutions are located.

Table 13

Percentage of respondents who believe post-secondary education makes 'very large' or 'somewhat large' economic contribution to areas where PSE institutions are located, 2025

Economy Contribution to Area Where Universities and Colleges are Located	Nova Scotia	Canada
Cities, Towns, Municipalities	71	62
Region of the Province	63	58
Province	59	56
Canada	45	49

Source: Counsel Public Affairs Inc., 2025

Economic Value: Regional

St. Francis Xavier University

A report on the economic value of St Francis Xavier University (Cormack & Tkacz, 2022) measured economic impact in 5 categories: institutional spending, student spending, visitor spending, alumni earning premiums, and research, detailed in Table 14.

Table 14

Economic impact of St. Francis Xavier University, 2016/17 & 2021/22

Category	2016-17 (millions)	2021-22 (millions)	% Change
Direct Institutional Spending	$104.2	$126.8	+21.7%
Student Spending	$13.4	$26.3	+96.2%
Visitor Spending	$32.3	$18.9	-41.4%
Earnings Premiums	$245.4	$316.5	+28.9%
Research Impact	$85.7	$106.7	+24.5%
Total	***$481.0***	***$595.2***	***+23.7%***

Source: Cormack & Tkacz, 2022

Cormack and Tkacz used the data in Table 15 to estimate the economic impact of StFX alumni in Nova Scotia to be $316,455,136, which is a 10.65% real increase from 2017.

Table 15

Earnings by Age Groups and Degrees, Nova Scotia ($) 2021/22

Age	Arts & Humanities	STEM	Business & Admin	Nursing	Education	Master's Degree	Any Bachelor's Degree
15-24	$28,375	$34,420	$51,700	$65,946	N/A	N/A	$43,050
25-34	$41,380	$59,397	$54,524	$73,895	$47,170	$58,791	$53,108
35-44	$54,366	$77,906	$80,005	$77,957	$58,779	$81,875	$69,426
45-54	$70,362	$89,544	$101,291	$81,700	$69,087	$94,953	$83,279
55-64	$114,264	$108,833	$95,662	$80,084	$63,941	$110,171	$91,330

Source: Cormack & Tkacz, 2022

Research Value

Although difficult to quantify, research is one of the primary functions of universities and should be considered for the value it brings. Cormack & Tkacz (2022) estimated the impact of StFX's research by calculating the share of Nova Scotia's research and development attributable to the higher education sector and then applying the university's 3.81% share of provincial university research spending. St.FX had an estimated research impact of $106.7 million in 2020–21. Other economic benefits of university research include:

- A 10% increase in the number of universities in a region leads to at least a 0.4% increase in GDP per capita in that region.
- Universities impact social attitudes: regions with universities having more prodemocratic sentiments.
- Industry is attracted to regions with universities, as companies tend to move close to sources of knowledge like universities.
- Using 2023 Statistics Canada data of average weekly earnings, the impact of St.FX's economic contribution on the labour market is equivalent to 10,823 full-time jobs in Nova Scotia. This represents over 2% of all employed workers in Nova Scotia.

Economic Value: National

Return on Investment

As an anchor industry, post-secondary education provides an impressive return on investment nationally, and provincially. Government support is vital to that success. The economic impact of universities and colleges depends not only on how much they spend, but also on where that money is spent. Purchasing goods and services from local suppliers keeps more public investment circulating within the province, supporting local businesses, creating jobs and generating further economic activity (CCPA, 2026).

Universities and colleges have a large economic footprint, and are major employers that pay competitive wages to produce high-value services, like research. Universities were identified as a 'premier industry' in 2010 (Cormack & Tkacz, 2022). Yet they are often excluded as an industry considered strategically important to Canada's economy, such as residential building, oil sands extractions, mining and quarrying, and transportation manufacturing. Those industries are considered high in economic importance to most Canadians, and receive generous government financial support (CCPA, 2026). But for every $100 produced in economic growth, universities

generate $117 in other industries across the economy, while the output for community colleges is $125. Comparatively, the economy-wide impact for residential construction and conventional oil and gas extraction is $99, and $93 for oil sands extraction (Statistics Canada).

The GDP of universities and colleges was $61 billion in 2025 - 2.1% of Canada's GDP. Table 16 provides a comparison of the GDP of several strategically important industries, and their contribution to Canada's GDP, in dollars, and by percentage.

Table 16

Post-secondary education's share of the economy, in comparison to GDP of industries considered 'strategically important' to Canada's economy, 2025

Sector	GDP of Industry	Percentage of Canada's GDP
Residential Building Construction	$66B	2.33%
Universities and colleges	$61B	2.1%
Oil sands extraction	$49B	1.73%
Oil and gas extraction (except oil sands)	$44B	1.54%
Mining and quarrying	$33B	1.17%
Transportation and Equipment Manufacturing	$33B	1.16%
Pipeline Transportation	$15B	0.53%
Petroleum refineries	$14B	0.49%

- *Source: Statistics Canada, Table 36-10-0594-01*

University and College Spending

The payroll alone makes universities and colleges strong economic drivers – as employees spend, save and invest those dollars back into their communities. Many university faculty and staff are unionized, which leads to better wages and working conditions – increasing the employees' contribution to economic growth. Universities and colleges paid $38.7 billion in salaries and wages in 2024, as detailed in Table 17.

Table 17

Total number of jobs and compensation at colleges and universities in Canada, 2022-2024

	Canada					
	Total Number of Jobs			Total Compensation for All Jobs		
	2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024
Community Colleges	125,255	125,980	137,715	$9,356,405	$ 9,810,160	$10,888,213
Universities	339,710	350,860	350,490	$24,854,848	$26,368,941	$27,886,022
Total	464,965	476,840	488,205	$34,211,253	$36,179,101	$38,774,235

Source: Statistics Canada

In addition to payroll, universities buy goods and services, in turn creating demand in other industries, like construction, transportation, food, energy and professional services (CCPA). And there is room for growth. Even a 10% shift in institutional purchasing toward local suppliers can produce meaningful benefits for local and regional economies (Cervelli & Horsnell, 2021).

Table 18

Goods and services purchased in Canada by universities and colleges in 2022 at basic prices

Area	Colleges	Universities	Total- 2022
Canada	$4.6B	$11.9B	$16.5B

Source: CCPA, 2026

Nationally, post-secondary institutions paid $1.1 billion in taxes on products in 2022, the majority of which was federal and provincial sales taxes, but included items like fuel taxes and import duties. Additionally, they paid $683 million in capital, payroll, land or property taxes. Income taxes paid by employees are not included in these figures (CCPA, 2026).

Table 19

Total taxes payable by universities and colleges in Canada, 2022

Type of Post-Secondary Education	Taxes on Products	Taxes on production
Colleges	$248.7M	$202.2M
Universities	$850.9M	$481.9M
Total	1.1B	$648.1M

Source: CCPA, 2026

Economic Value: International

Working with over 100 countries, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is a global policy forum that promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world. The OECD's Education at a Glance report (2024) provides an overview of key characteristics of the education system in Canada, and highlights issues of equity in education. The statistics include upper secondary (high school), and post-secondary (universities, colleges, etc.) education.

- Annual spending per student in Canada for post-secondary education was $24,406USD in 2023.
- Canada spends 5.3% of its GDP on educational institutions, from primary through post-secondary education, including research and development (R&D).
- Canada spending on PSE is greater than the OECD average of 4,9%, although its share has declined while the OECD average has remained stable.

Economic Value: Research

> "The irreplaceable role of post-secondary education's contribution to research and development in Canada cannot be overstated. If the long-term viability of the post-secondary education industry is endangered, this will deeply impact Canada's capacity for research and innovation—and that impacts our ability to compete on the world stage in a knowledge economy." – CCPA, Chapter 8, 2026

Although funding for PSE is less than 2% of Canada's GDP, the sector punches above its weight in research and development. The OECD reports that Canada leads G-7 countries in the share of higher education research and development (HERD) produced at 34.4%. (CCPA 2023, OECD). The OECD has also identified autonomous, well-resourced universities and research organizations as important components of strong innovation systems. Research generated by business interests often has an economic focus, while university generated research can emerge in ways that could not have been foreseen when the research began, enriching the social and economic value for the region and/or province.

Total funding for research and development in the higher education sector ranged from $18 - $18.5 billion between 2022 and 2024 as detailed in Table 20. Of that, $8.9 – 9.1 billion (49.4%) was provided by higher education itself (Table 21).

Table 20

Sources of funds for expenditures on research and development (R&D) in the higher education sector (x 1,000,000), Canada, 2022 - 2024

		2022	2023	2024
Canada	Canada Total, all sectors	$18, 077B	$18,283B	$18,465B
	Business enterprise	$1,240B	$1,254B	$1,267B
	Federal government	$4,259B	$4,307B	$4,350B
	Provincial governments	$1,414B	$1,430B	$1,444B
	Private non-profit	$2,082B	$2,105B	$2,127B
	Foreign Sources	$156B	$157B	$159B
	Higher Education	$8,927B	$9,029B	$9,119B

Source: Statistics Canada, Table 27-10-0363-01

Table 21

Percentage of higher education funds for expenditures on research and development (R&D) in the higher education sector (x 1,000,000), Canada and Nova Scotia, 2022 - 2024

		2022		2023		2024	
		Current Prices	% of total	Current Prices	% of total	Current Prices	% of total
Canada	Total, all sectors	$18,077B		$18,283B		$18,465B	
	Higher Education	$8,927B	49.4%	$9,029B	49.4%	$9,119B	49.4%*
Nova Scotia	Total, all sectors	$557M		NA		NA	
	Higher Education	$317M	56.9%	NA		NA	

Source: Statistics Canada, Table 27-10-0363-01

Social Value

Education at a Glance Report, OECD 2024:

- Women account for 56% of new entrants to post-secondary education in Canada, which is identical to the OECD average. The gap is larger among graduates, as women are more likely than men to complete their education.
- In 2023, 21% of women entering Canadian post-secondary education studied science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. 2% of men entered education-related fields.
- Across the OECD, 6% of all post-secondary education students were “internationally mobile” in 2022. In Canada, International students accounted for 19% of the student population, more than triple the average for OECD countries. Note: the International student cap, introduced by the federal government in January 2024, has significantly reduced that number.
- The effects of higher education on political stability, environmental sustainability, additional tax revenue, new idea generation, and improved income distribution warrant government investment in “expanded quality education”. (Keller, 2024).
- Societal benefits of the effects of higher education on human rights, health, happiness, life expectancy, and reduced inequality warrant government investment in “expanded quality education”. (Keller, 2024).

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