

Environmental Scan Series.1

Trends in Higher Education

Higher education in Canada is affected by trends across the STEEP spheres; both from shifts within the industry and culture of higher education, and by external shifts. This brief report outlines major factors for consideration in five spheres, and introduces five common drivers: **equity, access, Indigenization, sustainability and outcomes**.

Social Trends

Rapid social change has occurred both within and outside the academy, increasing the demand for student support and changing the demographic profile of academia. While institutions across Canada are addressing internal issues such as sexual assault prevention, diversity, equity and increasing mental health needs (for employees and students), external trends such as free speech, transparency, cannabis legalization and demographic shifts place additional pressure on institutions.¹⁻⁷

A multi-generational student population with representation from countries around the globe, combined with a focus on closing the gap for Indigenous learners, means that student needs have changed; preparation for the labour market of tomorrow and supportive, flexible learning options are considered along with academic rigour and reputation.⁶⁻¹⁰ A focus on equitable access and student success challenges institutions to consider optimal ways to support students across learning modalities.^{10,11}

Technological

Trends in technology are affecting both the functioning of higher education and the nature of curriculum. Technology continues to disrupt traditional models of education, and demand for skilled workers in the digital and tech sectors continues to increase.^{6,12-14} Automation is already having significant impacts on the workforce, pushing adult workers to upgrade their skills.^{12,13}

Relatively new technologies such as augmented reality, AI, and cloud computing are enhancing learning experiences, and personalized learning is becoming an expectation.^{6,12,15,16} Access to education includes technological investment; the 2019 federal budget included a promise to increase broadband access in isolated communities.¹⁷ While advances in educational technology enhance access and enable innovation, cyber security threats remain one of the most significant technological factors

STEEP

A framework for environmental scanning and analysis that identifies trends in five spheres, and in two dimensions (within higher education and external to higher education).

S – Social

How people work internally and with each other.

T – Technological

How people use technology, how society relies on technology, and how technology affects society.

E – Economic

Macro- or microeconomics, including global trends, jobs and skills needed for jobs, and industry shifts.

E – Environmental

Our external surroundings, including sustainability and our evolving workplaces, cities, and living spaces.

P – Political

Public policy, government systems, the people within them, and the effects of government decisions on our citizens and communities.

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affecting higher education today.^{6,12,15,16,19}

Economic

The BC economy is strong; increased demand for skilled workers and shrinking demographics has resulted in a tight labour market in which employers compete for technically savvy, socially conscious and multidisciplinary post secondary graduates by focusing on employee learning and development, social enterprise, and employee engagement.^{9,12,17,19-22} Part-time instructors make up a large portion of the post-secondary workforce, which has increased in its need for engagement and training (especially in data literacy).^{8,12} Provincial government budget cuts have been mitigated by recent increased enrolment from international students.⁸ While some governments have decreased tuition fees, the 2019 federal budget promises training credits, which will support continuing education and re-skilling.^{6,23}

Environmental

Sustainability has become more than an ideal; it is an expectation. A global higher education standard (STARS), climate change awareness, and long-term sustainability goals have heavily influenced post-secondary capital planning, curriculum, research, operations, and investment and finance.^{6,12,24,25} Climate change disasters have prompted new research funding, and some institutions have taken leadership roles in responding to climate change.²⁶⁻²⁸ The practical impacts of recent catastrophic events (such as wildfire) have impeded the functioning of some post-secondary institutions, while others have been called upon to provide disaster response support.^{29,30}

Political

National government migration policies played a large role in the unprecedented influx of international students into Canada over the last four years.^{6,31,32} Competition for international students will increase with the new United Kingdom post-Brexit international education strategy.^{31,33}

The affordability of higher education is an election 2020 topic in the USA; in Canada, the Ontario government has eliminated free tuition for low-income students and has reduced tuition fees, while the British Columbia government announced a decrease in student loan interest.^{6,34,35} The 2019 federal budget includes \$1.7 billion over six years to decrease the student loan burden for new graduates.^{17,23,34}

Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls for Action have bolstered or motivated the development of university strategic plans for advancing reconciliation, capacity building, culture change, and policy development.³⁶⁻³⁸ While government responses to the TRC are included in political trends, movements for Indigenization and equitable access to education are evident across social, technological, economic, and environmental trends as well.

Next in the Series

The next report in the Envision TRU Environmental Scan series will focus on economy: how will global, national, provincial and regional economic trends affect TRU enrolments?

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