

2017 Canadian Higher Education Year in Review — Academica Forum

 forum.academica.ca/forum/2017-canadian-higher-education-year-in-review

January 1, 2018

Other articles you may be interested in



[2017 Canadian Higher Education Year in Review](#)

Jan 1, 2018

2017 was a year of big stories for Canadian higher ed, from historically-long strikes to bitter debates over the meaning of academic freedom. We've combed through the 2,620 stories we ran this year in our daily *Academica Top Ten* and *Indigenous Top Ten*, analyzing our readership statistics to see which stories and themes received the most attention from our readers. We then combined this data with the insights of our crack team of researchers to whittle our list down to the top ten stories of 2017.



Student success starts with mental health

Sep 20, 2017

Attending university or college for the first time can be challenging, and with the onset of mental health illnesses typically occurring during adolescence, this means many students will experience mental health issues around the same time that they begin their PSE journey.



Is your institution using the right social platforms to engage students?

Sep 11, 2017

In the ever changing social media landscape, platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are gaining more traction than ever, challenging Facebook's dominant role, while others, like Twitter and Google+, have seen a steady decline amongst youth.

Academica Group

A Happy New Year to all the members of the higher ed community in Canada and beyond. We look forward to sharing many incredible stories with you in 2018, but for now, we'd like to take a look back at what happened in 2017, which was also Academica's 20th year of offering support and inspiration for higher ed.



2017 was a year of big stories for Canadian higher ed, from historically-long strikes to bitter debates over the meaning of academic freedom. We've combed through the 2,620 stories we ran this year in our daily Academica Top Ten and Indigenous Top Ten, analyzing our readership statistics to see which stories and themes received the most attention from our readers. We then combined this data with the insights of our crack team of researchers to whittle our list down to the top ten stories of 2017.

This year's top stories, in no particular order, are...

The Ontario College Strike

A number of union agreements were negotiated over the course of 2017, and the union

agreement to be negotiated between the College Employer Council and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union was expected by many to pose at least some challenge. OPSEU wanted faculty to have a stronger voice in academic decision-making and improvements to job security, while the CEC contended that the demands would cost the system roughly \$250M more per year.

Few expected that the failure to reach an agreement would result in the longest strike in the history of the Ontario college system. 12,000 professors, instructors, counsellors, and librarians stood on the picket lines from October 16th to November 19th, when the Ontario government passed back-to-work legislation that ended the strike and generated an extended semester. A class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of the province's 500,000 college students, thousands of whom dropped out of the college system. Reflecting on the strike, Ontario's Minister of Advanced Education Deb Matthews said that the college bargaining process "failed everybody," pledging that she would review the process to help avoid such a prolonged strike in the future.

On December 20th, a provincially appointed arbitrator set a new contract between the CEC and OPSEU. Contained in the contract was a faculty raise of 7.75% over four years, in addition to new language regarding academic freedom. OPSEU reported that the new contract also included improved job security for partial-load and full-time faculty, and a new government-run task force that will make recommendations on faculty complement, precarious work, college funding, student success, and governance issues.

Equity and Diversity

2017 saw a number of governments and institutions take concrete action to improve the equity and diversity of Canadian higher ed. In April, Canada's Minister of Science Kirsty Duncan called attention to the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program, calling its diversity numbers "dismal." Less than two weeks later, the federal government announced that Canadian postsecondary institutions must create action plans to addressing the chronic underrepresentation of minority groups within the CRC program by December 15th, after which they would have 18 to 24 months to ensure that the demographics of award recipients reflected those who were eligible to receive them.

Universities Canada announced that the country's universities were pleased with the mandate, while critics such as Malinda Smith, Kisha Supernant, and Nancy Bray of the University of Alberta argued that the mandate did not go far enough. In October, the federal government also introduced term limits on Tier 1 CRC research chairs, limiting their term to a single renewal in order to spur more renewal in those holding the chairs.

In May, Wilfrid Laurier University announced that it would increase the pay of 152 female professors by an average of \$4.5K per year after a study found that they were unfairly paid less than their male counterparts. In October, Canada's universities also committed to collecting and publishing demographic data about faculty, staff, and students in order to help increase diversity and inclusion on campus.

Indigenization and Reconciliation

2017 marked a number of changes in Canadian higher ed when it came to Indigenization. Campuses visibly changed over the course of the year as Indigenous gardens, ceremony spaces, wikuoms and tipis, and totem poles were established across the country. For example, [Western University](#) introduced Indigenous-focused campus housing, Queen's expanded its [Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre Space](#), [Lethbridge College](#) received an Indigenous name, and Northwest Community College phased out the use of its [Thunderbird symbol](#). Red Crow Community College and the University of Lethbridge launched the [Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program](#), and institutions such as [Red River College](#), [UWinnipeg](#), [Renison University College](#), and [UBC](#) launched courses and initiatives focused on Indigenous languages. The year also saw a significant amount of support for Indigenization coming from students, with the Students' Association at Algonquin College announcing a [\\$1M investment](#) for Indigenous artifacts and architecture at the college's new Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Learning Centre and Institute for Indigenous Entrepreneurship.

Mentorship and transition programs were created or expanded, such as those at [Lakehead University](#), the [University of Manitoba](#), and [Grande Prairie Regional College](#), as well as through partnerships like that of [Vancouver Island University](#) and [Yukon College](#). The federal and provincial governments also introduced new initiatives, which included a federal investment of \$90M over two years in the [Post-Secondary Student Support Program](#). Ontario also proposed legislation empowering ON Indigenous postsecondary institutions to independently [grant degrees and diplomas](#) to their students, and Alberta invested in the development of [Alberta Indigenous Construction Career Centres](#) at Bow Valley College and NorQuest College.

The goals of Indigenization and reconciliation continue to face many challenges, however. The director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba, Ry Moran, [expressed concern](#) early in 2017 that the term "reconciliation" was at risk of becoming an empty buzzword. The University of Sudbury's Mary Anne Corbiere called for an [effective Indigenous language preservation plan](#) and Michael Bopp, Lee Brown, and Jonathan Robb provided a [comprehensive account](#) of the challenges facing institutions in pursuing Indigenization.

Student organizations from institutions such as [Algoma University](#) and [Dalhousie University](#) boycotted Canada 150 celebrations, which resulted in particularly notable fallout around the [later-withdrawn disciplinary action](#) taken against Dal Student Union VP Masuma Khan. UBC also saw a [controversy](#) around the invitation, cancellation, and re-invitation of former Olympics Canada CEO John Furlong to a speaking engagement. Ryerson University's student union demanded that the school [change its name and tear down a statue](#) of its namesake, Egerton Ryerson, for the role he played in the creation of Canada's residential schools.

(Interested in trends in Indigenous education in Canada? We invite you to subscribe today to our bi-weekly [Indigenous Top Ten](#).)

Freedom of Speech vs. Academic Freedom

This past year, the highly contentious issue of free speech spilled into the realm of academic freedom. The first major flashpoint of the year came in March, when the director of McGill University's Institute for the Study of Canada, Andrew Potter, resigned after publishing an article in *Maclean's* that accused Quebec of suffering from "social malaise" and provoked significant backlash from critics including Quebec Premier Phillippe Couillard. The resignation drew concerns around the potential violation of Potter's academic freedom. University of Toronto Professor Jordan Peterson also accused the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for denying him research funding over his public refusal to use genderless pronouns in 2016, and later raised concerns among fellow U of T professors when he threatened to create a website that named and shamed professors who taught "postmodern courses."

Teaching Assistant Lindsay Shepherd made national headlines when Wilfrid Laurier University announced a third-party probe into a professor and administrator's treatment of her after she used a clip of Jordan Peterson in a class tutorial. An apology was later issued for how the situation was handled, and an independent investigation into the matter later revealed that contrary to what Shepherd was told, no students had complained either formally or informally about her showing of the clip. The University of Lethbridge reinstated Professor Anthony Hall in late November, following his suspension in October 2016 for comments he made about questioning the events of the Holocaust and Zionist connections to the 9/11 attacks. Throughout the suspension, Hall maintained that academic freedom should ensure his ability to promote whatever work or views he wished to express.

The debates surrounding academic freedom and free speech inspired a number of editorial pieces, including a piece by York University Dean Paul Axelrod, who argued that academic freedom "is not absolute and it is not the simple equivalent of 'freedom of speech.'" Axelrod concluded that the boundaries of academic freedom have shifted throughout history and will continue to shift.

York University vs. Access Copyright

A shockwave rippled through the higher ed landscape in the summer of 2017 when the Federal Court of Canada ruled against York University in its widely publicized legal battle with Access Copyright. The battle began in 2011, when York ended its relationship with the consortium over the rising cost of accessing published materials, opting instead to implement guidelines ensuring that course pack materials met "fair dealing" guidelines. In July 2017, however, the federal court found that York's guidelines, which permitted copying up to 10% of a protected work, did not constitute fair dealing.

Experts said that the decision would have major implications across the Canadian postsecondary landscape, as a number of other institutions had based their own policies on York's. Critics argued that the decision would significantly weaken access to copyrighted materials for educational purposes. The Canadian Association of University Teachers was one

of the [first to condemn](#) the ruling, calling it a "setback for balanced copyright," and the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations [argued](#) that the ruling could limit students' access to quality PSE. Advocates of the move noted that it would fix a number of "[watered down](#)" [provisions](#) that did not properly protect intellectual property.

The Case for Fundamental Research

In April, the Canadian government released the results of the [Naylor Report](#), named for former University of Toronto president David Naylor, which was described as the most comprehensive review of federal science funding in four decades. The report included 35 detailed recommendations, which were welcomed with a call for their full and immediate implementation by advocates.

Both University of Calgary President [Elizabeth Cannon](#) and the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#) urged the government to act on the report's recommendations in high profile news articles. By August, higher ed journalist Brian Owens [wrote that](#) "Canada's academic community has launched a full court press to encourage the government to adopt the recommendations of the report of Canada's Fundamental Science Review panel." In September, Canada announced that it would [provide \\$515M](#) to support fundamental research through the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada's 2017 competition. The funding marked NSERC's largest annual investment to date.

Career Readiness of Canada's Graduates

For years, Canada's postsecondary institutions have seen a growing demand to make students more prepared for careers when they graduate. This year, however, this interest seemed to hit a new gear in both the number of editorials and studies published on the topic and the amount of traffic that our Top Ten readers directed toward these stories. A [study released](#) by the Counseling Foundation of Canada found that over half of Canada's postsecondary graduates would not take the same program again if they had the chance to do it all over, a finding that was backed by a [study](#) conducted by Monster.ca.

In April, the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling released a [study](#) looking at the most impressive career services models currently in use at Canadian postsecondary institutions and later released a [reference guide](#) that highlighted some of the most impressive models of PSE career services across the country, drawing insights from interviews with high-performing career services staff. Simon Fraser University announced the development of a [job-seeking guide](#) for transgender students that was designed to address specific concerns and experiences faced by transgender job-seekers and cover tips for resumes, interviews, and references. Colleges and Institutes Canada unveiled its [Career-Launcher Internship program](#), and the Government of Canada announced that it would [introduce 10,000 paid internships](#) per year by 2020-2021 through an investment of \$221M in Mitacs in order to provide hands-on learning experience to students.

Postsecondary Infrastructure

The state of Canada's aging postsecondary infrastructure was on many institutions' minds in 2017. Polytechnics Canada CEO Nobina Robinson and NAIT President Glenn Feltham called for both a greater investment in infrastructure and in the people responsible for building and maintaining that infrastructure. In August, the Canadian government announced that it would invest \$52M in 220 new infrastructure projects at 51 universities across Canada through the Canada Foundation for Innovation. The Université de Montréal, HEC Montréal, and Polytechnique Montréal collectively raised \$581M through the Campus Montréal fundraising campaign to support major infrastructure and research projects.

In August, the University of Saskatchewan sought approval from its provincial government to borrow \$90M to cover the cost of renovating five prominent buildings on its campus, which would eliminate a fraction of the reported \$330M backlog of "critical deferred maintenance" for the university's infrastructure. In October, these concerns were echoed by the University of Alberta and its nearly \$1B deferred campus maintenance bill. Sensing the growing climate of concern around campus infrastructure, the Canadian government announced in October that it would invest \$554M in 117 infrastructure projects at 61 universities, colleges, and research hospitals across Canada.

Campus Divisions

While the rise of the alt-right made bigger headlines in the United States, it became an increasing cause of concern for many Canadian postsecondary campuses in 2017. Across the country, incidents of racist behaviour were reported in growing numbers, causing students and institutions to denounce the rising tide of nationalistic and racist sentiment. On January 17th, a CBC contributor warned the Canadian public to beware of right-wing populism on the country's campuses. Less than a month later, an ultra-nationalist group called Atalante-Québec was reportedly working to recruit new members at Université Laval and two Quebec City CEGEPs. Posters questioning the Holocaust were found on the campus of the University of Calgary, and over the course of the year, messages targeting people groups, such as Muslims and the LGBTQ community, appeared on campuses across Canada, including at the University of Victoria, Brandon University, and the University of Windsor.

In *The Walrus*, William Pang noted in October that part of the alt-right's success on Canadian campuses could be attributed to its perceived support of the free speech movement. Pang argued that these groups were "intentionally blurring the lines between free speech and hate speech" in a way that was successfully gaining them sympathy with some members of the campus community.

Record International Enrolments

2017 was a year of record international enrolments in Canada, which began with a massive surge in [online traffic to the institutional websites](#) following the election of Donald Trump in the US and the continuing fallout of the Brexit vote in the UK. Simona Chiose of the *Globe and Mail* later reported that the growth in applications was converting into [enrolment growth](#), with some schools seeing jumps of 25% in international admissions. Despite the record-setting year, however, experts were quick to advise Canadian institutions to plan carefully for potential changes in future enrolment patterns. US-based analyst Rahul Choudaha advised British Columbia institutions to concentrate more of their recruitment efforts [in India](#), and Australia-based expert Andrew Barkla advised Canada to invest [more funding into building its brand](#) as an international study destination if it wished to compete with other countries on a long-term basis.

By July, Canadian experts in international enrolments were arguing that Canada's record year was [due to more](#) than simply the "Trump bump," arguing that the country would still be having its record year even if Hillary Clinton had won the US election. South of the border, however, 86% of colleges surveyed in a nationwide study said that Trump's statements and policies were making it harder for them to recruit international students, and only 34% of schools had [met enrolment targets](#) in 2017, down from 37% a year before. Some of the drop was attributed to a decline in international student enrolments, with some schools reporting a 20% to 50% drop in this number since 2016.

What to Watch in 2018

In a SectorVu poll conducted in September, we asked our readers to select (from a list of options) what they thought would be the greatest challenge facing Canadian Higher Ed in 2018. Campus mental health was the most commonly selected (61%), followed by free speech on campus (23%). Will these predictions pan out? Only time will tell. In the meantime, Academica is committed to bringing the highest quality research, consulting, content, and career listings to the higher ed community as we move forward together.

17 Likes

Share

[Academica Group](#)

It all starts with a deep understanding of the sector, the institution and the stakeholder groups. We'll bring our two decades of applicant and student survey data and combine it with custom research that is specific to the challenge you're facing or strategy you're considering.

