

Stakeholder Summary

Canadian media coverage of postsecondary education on the decline

Coverage of postsecondary education in Canadian print media outlets is declining and has been trending downward since the mid-2000s, says a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). *What's the Story? National Media Coverage of Higher Education in Canada* also finds that government policy is the most common topic covered in news articles, while coverage of skills and training has increased over the past 15 years.

Project description

The study's authors from the University of Toronto, Scarborough used computerized text-analysis techniques to comb through thousands of news articles (both print and online) related to postsecondary education published from 1999 to 2015. The articles were drawn from 15 newspapers and magazines that were selected to capture the largest circulation media outlets in major Canadian markets as well as those with a national focus. The study examines coverage of eight key issues: cost, enrolment, skills and training, research, labour issues, programs and curriculum, government policy, and tuition. It also looks at regional variation in media coverage and the tone of the coverage.

Findings

A key contributor to public awareness and understanding of higher education, media coverage of the sector in Canada has been on a downward trend since the mid-2000s. It declined sharply in 2008, likely attributable to the financial crisis of that year, and continued to decrease until 2015, the end of the period under study. Media coverage of postsecondary issues fluctuates in a seasonal pattern that coincides with the academic year; it is highest in the fall and spring and tails off over the summer months.

Government policy is the central topic covered in news articles. Policy changes, federal and provincial elections, and the introduction of government budgets tend to prompt increases in media coverage. The number of news articles pertaining to skills and training increased over the time period under study, the only one of the eight topics to show an uptick. This trend is particularly noticeable during the Great Recession when coverage of skills and training became more frequent. Coverage of all other areas declined. Tuition saw the most pronounced drop in coverage except for the period covering the Quebec student strikes in 2012–2013, in which proposed tuition increases played a central role. The strikes temporarily raised the prominence of tuition issues nationwide, the study notes.

The study also uncovered four additional issues likely to receive media coverage: scholarships and awards, plagiarism and legal issues, the societal and community role of postsecondary institutions, and campus safety and security.

Media coverage tends to vary by region. For example, labour issues are more likely to be covered in Ontario while coverage of tuition is more likely in Quebec. Provincial events such as the Ontario double cohort and the Quebec student strikes affected coverage trends across the country.

The authors of *What's the Story? National Media Coverage of Higher Education in Canada* are Tanya Whyte, Kaspar Beelen, Alex Mierke-Zatwarnicki, Christopher Cochrane and Peter Loewen, University of Toronto, Scarborough.