



report

**Post-secondary
Education
Representatives
Videoconference**

October 15, 2020

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

**Post-secondary Education Representatives
Videoconference
October 15, 2020**

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Larry Brown, President
Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer
Nadia Ibrahim, National Representative
Diane Fowles, Administrative Representative

1. Welcome and Introductions

The Chair, Nadia Ibrahim, welcomed participants to the meeting. She acknowledged that the National Union office is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.

Ibrahim reviewed the agenda and invited participants to introduce themselves.

2. Opening Remarks

Larry Brown, NUPGE President, provided opening remarks. He recalled the number of issues and unknowns that were raised at the post-secondary education representatives' videoconference in June. Those included the move to online teaching/learning with limited training to no training for staff and concerns around funding and intellectual property. Brown added that NUPGE hoped this second meeting provided an opportunity for Components to share developments on these issues, as well as best practices and any wins, so that we can build on each other's successes.

Brown highlighted some of NUPGE's other work, including 2 recent publications on considerations related to working from home. Other priorities include child care, anti-racism, combating austerity, and fair taxation.

He also spoke about the political context across the country, including anti-union legislation in Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. On the positive side, during the pandemic, we have seen a growing recognition of the value of unions. Brown noted reports of workers approaching Components wishing to join the union.

Bert Blundon, NUPGE Secretary-Treasurer, offered some additional opening remarks. He echoed the concerns surrounding the situation in Alberta—austerity, legislation to undermine unions, and privatization of health care—and whether other governments will follow this precedent. We must be ready to push back against the threat of privatization in the education system.

Blundon also asked participants how the pandemic is affecting enrolment in post-secondary education and how remote learning is impacting students with special needs.

3. Component Reports: Post-secondary Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Numerous issues remain in the sector—both those arising in the pandemic context and those that preexisted it. While experiences vary across (and within) the provinces, it was clear that there were more commonalities than differences. Detailed accounts can be found in the attached Component reports, but what follows is a summary of the core issues, trends, and initiatives.

Workload

Across all Components, workload remains one of the top issues affecting staff. Workload is increasing, with the switch to online learning (also known as remote learning or virtual learning) having created more work for instructors. Both instructors and support staff have also had to learn new platforms, such as Zoom or Moodle. The extent of training provided, if any, varies by province. It was also noted that this additional training can further add to workload.

Several Components reported on management's failure to conceptualize the time and work required to adjust to online learning, including curriculum development. There were also several reports of employees working overtime as a result.

In a couple of cases, class sizes have increased—due to staff layoffs, or fewer and more staggered classes and labs—which has increased the workload for the instructors. At one Saskatchewan institution, 30% of administrative staff were laid off and their work was offloaded to the instructors.

Employer response has varied. In BC, for example, employers have stalled on providing workload relief, taking the stance that the pandemic is not a “normal” time. A few Components reported on grievances regarding workload. In Newfoundland and Labrador, workload has been addressed in some cases due to both individual and group grievances. Participants discussed the challenge of follow-through in group grievances, especially getting sign-on from members who are precariously employed.

Several Components reported that intellectual property remains a concern, especially with the move to online learning.

Working from Home

Overall, many employees in this sector are still working from home (WFH). Participants discussed the benefits and limitations of WFH. On the positive side, participants identified reduced commute times, the effectiveness of virtual meetings, and potentially lower environmental impact as benefits of WFH.

They also identified the many challenges. Not all staff have had the proper space or equipment required to do their jobs from home. Members have raised concerns about the costs associated with WFH, such as utilities. It varies whether the employer is providing equipment for employees and how—directly or by subsidizing the cost. A related issue is internet connectivity, especially for those in rural or remote areas.

While WFH can have a positive impact on work-life balance, there were also reports of the negative impacts. The blurring of the line between home life and work life, coupled with high workloads, has led many employees to work longer hours while WFH.

It is particularly challenging for working parents, especially women. Child care has been a challenge for those WFH and those in the workplace. There were reports of members increasingly using (or exhausting) their sick time because of child care needs.

The extent to which employers are accommodating WFH requests varies by provinces, with some employees struggling to get permission to work from home, while others are being encouraged to do so.

In a couple of provinces, there was a reported increase in work-related injury, such as wrist and back issues, while employees have been WFH. There have also been concerns about the impact on mental health, especially for those who are isolated.

An emerging issue is what seems to be stricter supervision (or micromanaging) of employees while WFH compared to when they were in the workplace. The reports suggested there is a sense of distrust among employers and management towards their staff. For example, there were reports of employers requiring staff to log their daily activities in detail. This appears to be linked to the observation that management does not understand the additional work that comes with online teaching. It should be noted that there were also accounts of employees receiving no supervision at all.

Reopening of Institutions

Most institutions are following a blended learning model, with both online and in-person classes. It is mostly the hands-on or practical courses and labs that have resumed in person. Whether class sizes have increased, decreased, or remained the same varied by Component.

However, all classes have resumed in person in Nova Scotia, which saw few to no COVID-19 cases in recent months. In Saskatchewan's regional colleges, all classes resumed in person with fewer students and heightened health and safety protocols.

Enrolment figures vary by province, and even by institution, but overall, the impact on enrolment was not as severe as anticipated. There has been a decrease in international student enrolment to differing degrees across the country, but not to the extent that was expected. Notably, some institutions rely more heavily than others on international student enrolment, such as the Francophone colleges in New Brunswick.

There were some reported increases in domestic enrolment in Saskatchewan and BC. Interestingly, in Nova Scotia, there has been an overall increase in enrolment. This may be the result of the low caseload of COVID-19. One concerning observation was that in BC, there has been a decrease in Indigenous student enrolment across the sector.

COVID-19 Protocols

Where facilities are open, the health and safety protocols are similar across the provinces. Common measures include screening, physical distancing, plexiglass shields, mandatory or encouraged masks, additional cleaning, fewer or staggered classes, and limits on gathering size. Many institutions have strict rules around who is

allowed on campus, such as requiring employees and students to give formal notice of when they will be on campus.

It varies how much employers have been transparent with unions about, or have engaged them on, these issues and protocols. For example, at one Manitoba college, the union has been able to foster open communication with the institution leadership. In contrast, most colleges in Ontario have not been willing to engage with the union on questions related to issues like health and safety.

Layoffs

The layoff figures vary by province, by institution, and even by employment type. The most staggering figure was in Ontario, where 75% of part-time support staff have been laid off (i.e., technically, their contracts were not renewed).

At the other extreme, in New Brunswick, there have been no layoffs due to the pandemic. Instead, institutions have moved staff around to other areas because they do not want to lose their specializations in the long term. In Nova Scotia, a coalition of unions was able to push the institutions at the beginning of the pandemic to commit to no layoffs due to COVID-19. Notably, some Components remain concerned that layoffs are to come, especially if provinces pursue austerity.

There were reports from Ontario and Nova Scotia about locals where a workshare program was implemented. In the Nova Scotia case, the employer agreed to top up wages to 95%.

Impact on Students

Participants discussed the varying experiences of students during this time. Several noted that with the online learning model, some students are thriving and others are struggling, with more accounts of the latter. Like staff, students are having to learn new platforms on top of their regular coursework.

Depending on their housing and family situations, students may not have the adequate space, appropriate setup, or privacy to do their work. In a couple of examples in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the institution has provided laptops to students who need them. Internet connectivity can also present a challenge to students, especially in remote areas like northern Saskatchewan.

There were also success stories, such as virtual tutoring sessions and library supports working well for both students and staff.

Political Climate

Similar to the experience with employers, Components reported varying experiences with provincial governments and their transparency and engagement with unions.

Several Components observed that their provincial governments are using the pandemic as an excuse to pursue preexisting agendas to expand online learning and

privatization. For example, the Ontario government has been pushing online learning and is pursuing other changes, such as moving to performance-based funding and micro-credentials.

There were some reports of funding cuts already, such as in Manitoba at the beginning of the pandemic. There is a general concern about what provincial austerity would mean for post-secondary institutions and, in turn, employees.

Collective Bargaining

Collective bargaining has begun in a number of provinces, including in cases where it was delayed due to the pandemic. There was a lot of worry around entering bargaining with the many unfriendly governments. It was also noted that bargaining virtually may present its own challenges.

Campaigns and Member Engagement

Despite the immense challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, several Components reported on an increase in member engagement. It was observed that virtual meetings and training, while they have their limitations, have facilitated wider participation.

Many participants also commented on how they are seeing a rise in the popularity of unions more generally during the pandemic, as more workers are recognizing the value of unions. Some Components have seen organizing opportunities, such as in Nova Scotia and PEI, in addition to the increased engagement with existing members.

Components also reported on recent or ongoing campaign initiatives. For example, the NBU is undertaking a campaign on free tuition for all. During the pandemic, OPSEU organized a membership education campaign for its child care sector on their health and safety rights. It is also working on a campaign to push back against the micro-credential approach the government has proposed.

Several Components, including the MGEU, OPSEU, the NSGEU, and NAPE reported positive experiences working together across the province within their Components (i.e., across institutions) or with other unions to discuss common issues in the sector. They have yielded fruitful collaboration and, as in the case of the NSGEU, success in writing a joint letter to institutions and seeing their demands largely met.

4. Next Steps

Participants are encouraged to send any information on campaigns or other materials that they wish to share with the group to Nadia Ibrahim (nibrahim@nupge.ca).

There was interest in a future meeting of this sectoral group.



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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