



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan student organization composed of 21 student associations representing 250,000 post-secondary students. Through its partnership with the Quebec Students Union (QSU) and their 8 member associations representing 77,000 students from Quebec, CASA presents a national student voice to the federal government. CASA advocates for a post-secondary education (PSE) system that is affordable, accessible, innovative and of the highest quality.

Ensuring that all Canadians can become highly educated and trained is at the core of creating a stable, competitive and productive economic future. If adopted, our recommendations below would enhance existing federal programs and thereby improve student productivity throughout their studies, as well as in the workforce as contributors to the broader Canadian economy.

CASA's RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That the Tri-Agencies create a pilot grant program, at an estimated \$8 million, to support the development and distribution of OERs.
- Establish a Canada-wide, interest-free non-repayment period on student loans at an annual cost of \$95 million.
- Introduce a Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) funding mechanism to support the up-front costs of procuring a mental health accessibility assessment at a cost of \$25 million dollars.
- Expand Canada Summer Jobs to include 40,000 new part-time and year-round jobs for students at an estimated annual cost of \$127 million.
- Invest an additional \$37.5 million in new Tri-Agencies funding specifically for graduate students.
- Use *Canada's Fundamental Science Review* as a blueprint for long-term federal government support for research.



OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OERs)

An accessible and affordable post-secondary education (PSE) system is essential to fostering a more productive economy. An important aspect of accessibility is ensuring that educational materials are affordable, while also of the highest quality. Open educational resources (OERs) are an example of an innovative learning tool that significantly benefits students and educators in post-secondary.

OERs are “teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others.”¹ Examples of OERs include textbooks that can be accessed by students for free, as well as lesson plans, videos, quizzes, lecture notes and other teaching material for instructors.

For students in British Columbia (BC), OERs have had significant impacts on the accessibility, affordability and quality of educational materials. According to a recent survey of BC students, 96% who used an OER felt its quality was either average, above average, or excellent.² Also, BC’s OER project is estimated to have saved over 40,000 students over \$4 million from 2012 to 2017.³ OERs save students money and facilitate learning. Plus, OERs stimulate the sharing of ideas and teaching materials amongst faculty, who are some of the best producers of educational content.

CASA recommends that the Tri-Agencies create a pilot grant, at an estimated cost of \$8 million annually, that provides funding for graduate students and faculty to develop OERs. CASA is also calling on the Tri-Agencies to explore creating an online repository of OERs developed with support from their grant.

¹ *Education / OER* (Creative Commons). Accessed online: <https://creativecommons.org/about/program-areas/education-oer/>

² Rajiv Jhangiani and Surita Jhangiani, “Investigating the Perceptions, Use, and Impact of Open Textbooks: A Survey of Post-Secondary Students in British Columbia,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 18, no. 4 (June 2017): 172-192. Accessed online: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/3012/4214>

³ *Open Textbook Stats, Known adoptions in B.C.* (BCcampus OpenEd). Accessed online: <https://open.bccampus.ca/open-textbook-stats/>



CSLP INTEREST-FREE NON-REPAYMENT PERIOD

CASA believes that student aid must be provided to all students in a clear and equitable fashion that ensures no student is unduly burdened by the costs of education. This also applies to students who have finished their studies and are now focused on their next great opportunity.

Currently, the National Student Loans Service Centre (NSLSC) notifies borrowers upon graduation that they have a “six-month non-repayment period” before they need to begin repaying their loans. Many assume that this means they will not accumulate extra interest or charges over this period. While the provincial portions of many student aid programs do not charge interest during the first six months, the federal portion of a student’s loan accrues interest immediately following graduation. This discrepancy between federal and provincial assistance (i.e. Ontario and Alberta) causes stress and confusion for new graduates, who often end up with more debt than expected.

The current lack of a six-month interest-free period on the federal portion of student loans stifles productivity and unfairly burdens new graduates for a couple reasons. Firstly, finding gainful employment can take up to or more than six months. In 2016, the average duration of unemployment for job seekers was 19.8 weeks, or just under five months.⁴ Secondly, for those who do find employment, this initial period is often fraught with expenses, such as the cost of moving away for work.

While the Repayment Assistance Plan protects those who do not find steady work after six months, nothing is done to offset the costs of students transitioning out of study. That is why CASA recommends that a Canada-wide, interest-free non-repayment period on student loans be implemented at an annual cost of \$95 million. This change not only better reflects the challenges of the current job market, it also provides new graduates sufficient time to find paying work before accumulating more debt. CASA believes this is a worthwhile investment because it supports students in their transition to gainful employment and will improve their overall productivity.

⁴ *Labour force survey estimates (LFS), duration of unemployment by sex and age group, CANSIM Table 282-0048* (Statistics Canada). Accessed online: <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&id=2820048>



CSLP MENTAL HEALTH ACCOMMODATIONS ASSESSMENT

Over the past decade, governments have come to fully realize the value of promoting and fostering mental wellness in Canada. Not only has this been about doing the right thing, but it is increasingly clear that it will also help Canadian productivity. Per the Mental Health Commission of Canada, mental health challenges and illnesses have cost the Canadian economy an estimated \$50 billion per year.⁵

Student mental health is a significant issue on post-secondary campuses. According to a 2016 study, 44.4% of surveyed students felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function,” 64.5% “felt overwhelming anxiety,” and 13% had “seriously considered suicide” at some point in the last 12 months.⁶ Given these statistics, the importance of this issue cannot be underestimated.

Post-secondary institutions are seeing significant increases in the number of students struggling with and seeking accommodations related to mental health concerns. In New Brunswick, there was a 300% increase in the number of post-secondary students seeking a mental health related accommodation between 2012 and 2015.⁷ These accommodations are necessary for ensuring that a student with a mental health related issue is able to continue their studies while receiving assistance. Unfortunately, with long wait times for campus mental health services,⁸ students are often required to obtain a psychological assessment through off-campus health practitioners which can be cost-prohibitive. These assessments can cost up to \$3,000, an expense that most student aid recipients cannot afford. Special intervention from the federal government can help solve these problems by expanding an existing funding framework within the CSLP.

Currently, the CSLP offers partial reimbursement for students with learning disabilities for their assessment costs. CASA recommends establishing a similar funding mechanism, at a cost of \$25 million per year, to support the up-front costs of accessing a mental health accessibility assessment through the CSLP. CASA also recommends the CSLP review its programming to ensure that it is meeting the needs of students with mental health concerns who might require greater flexibility in their program length and duration requirements.

⁵ *Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada* (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). Accessed online: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-06/Investing_in_Mental_Health_FINAL_Version_ENG.pdf

⁶ *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Reference Group Data Report Spring 2016* (Hanover, MD: American College Health Association, 2016). Accessed online: <http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/NCHA-II%20SPRING%202016%20CANADIAN%20REFERENCE%20GROUP%20DATA%20REPORT.pdf>

⁷ *Postsecondary: The Pathway to Prosperity* (New Brunswick Student Alliance, 2016). Accessed online: https://aenbnbsa.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/nbsa-2016_2017-lobby-doc_final-1.pdf

⁸ Rodrigo Narro Perez, Shawn Murphy, and Michael Gill, *Policy Paper: Student Health and Wellness* (Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2014), 28. Accessed online: https://d3n8a8pro7vnmx.cloudfront.net/ousa/pages/80/attachments/original/1473368840/Student_Health_and_Wellness_document.pdf?1473368840; *Towards a Comprehensive Mental Health Strategy: The Crucial Role of Colleges and Universities as Partners* (Ontario College Health Association, December 2009), 16. Accessed online: http://oucha.ca/pdf/mental_health/2009_12_OUCHA_Mental_Health_Report.pdf



IMPROVING THE CANADA SUMMER JOBS PROGRAM

Jobs continue to be at the forefront of students' and recent graduates' concerns. Youth unemployment is still significantly higher than the general unemployment rate (12% in June 2017, compared to an overall unemployment rate of 6.5%), and underemployment persists.⁹ While PSE continues to be the single best career investment for Canadians, better supports are needed to help students transition into their careers.

The government's commitment to facilitating access to employment for students has not gone unnoticed. Students support the new investments announced for Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) in Budget 2016. Therefore, CASA's recommendation is to build upon the progress already made in this valuable program.

Expanding this program to offer a part-time job option that students could pursue over the course of the school year would make CSJ more flexible and responsive to the needs of students today. Students are more likely to work part-time than in past decades,¹⁰ and fewer students are following the traditional schedule of full-time studies with summers off. Also, the Expert Panel on Youth Employment recently endorsed CASA's position on the CSJ, recommending that the program evolve to be open to all youth, including students studying full and part-time, and that it include part-time jobs and year-round opportunities.¹¹

CASA recommends expanding CSJ to include 40,000 new part-time, year-round jobs for students at an estimated annual cost of \$127 million. Work experience while studying provides valuable skills and experiences that facilitate entry into the workforce and greater productivity for students and recent graduates across all disciplines of study.

⁹ *Labour Force Survey, June 2017* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, June 2017). Accessed online: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170707/dq170707a-eng.htm>; Sharanjit Uppal and Sébastien LaRochelle-Coté, *Overqualification among recent university graduates in Canada* (Statistics Canada, 2014). Accessed online: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2014001/article/11916-eng.htm>

¹⁰ René Morissette, *Perspectives on the Youth Labour Market in Canada* (Statistics Canada, April 2016). Accessed online: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2016002-eng.htm>

¹¹ *13 Ways to Modernize Youth Employment in Canada* (Expert Panel on Youth Employment, 2017). Accessed online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/youth-expert-panel/report-modern-strategies-youth-employment.html>



TRI-AGENCY STUDENT RESEARCH FUNDING

Students play a significant role in Canadian research and innovation, and were encouraged by the significant increases in overall Tri-Agency research funding in Budget 2016. However, the proportion of Tri-Agency funding available for graduate student scholarships remains lower today than in 2011.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), collectively known as the Tri-Agencies, experienced massive cuts in research funding from 2011 to 2015. While overall funding for NSERC and SSHRC increased by 11.2% and 11.8% respectively in 2016, the proportion of their overall funding directed at graduate student research has declined by 0.7% and 2.4% respectively. More must be done to support Canada's researchers and innovators.

This government has committed itself to investing in science and innovation, and supporting the next generation of researchers is essential to enhancing Canada's productivity and contribution in these fields. *Canada's Fundamental Science Review* highlights the importance of supporting graduate students, stating that "the number of scholarships and fellowships awarded by the granting councils is dwarfed by the overall population of doctoral-stream graduate students and PDFs [post-doctoral fellows] in Canada."¹² The review also calls for significant increases in direct funding to investigator-driven research.

To address this gap, CASA and our partner, the Quebec Student Union (QSU), recommend the federal government invest an additional \$37.5 million in new Tri-Agency funding specifically for graduate students. Furthermore, we call for the Tri-Agencies to increase the proportion of their overall budget that goes to graduate research funding to return (factoring in inflation) to the overall proportion it held in 2011. These steps will ensure that more graduate students have the support they need to help make Canada a productive global leader in research and innovation.

CASA also calls on the federal government to use *Canada's Fundamental Science Review*, released in April 2017, as a blueprint for the long-term support of science and research in Canada.

¹² *Investing in Canada's Future: Strengthening the Foundations of Canadian Research* (Canada's Fundamental Science Review, 2017), 138. Accessed online:
[http://www.sciencereview.ca/eic/site/0.59.nsf/vwapi/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf/\\$file/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf](http://www.sciencereview.ca/eic/site/0.59.nsf/vwapi/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf/$file/ScienceReview_April2017-rv.pdf)