

Safeguarding the Future by Protecting Students

**CASA's Submission to the Standing Committee on
Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, and
the Status of Persons with Disabilities**



CASA | ACAE

Canadian Alliance of Student Associations
Alliance canadienne des associations étudiantes

Background

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a national voice for Canadian post-secondary students composed of student associations representing undergraduate, graduate, college, and polytechnic students. In partnership with the Quebec Student Union, we collectively represent 350,000 students in Canada. CASA envisions a post-secondary system in Canada that is accessible, affordable, innovative, and of the highest quality for students. This vision for Canadian post-secondary education is being met with additional challenges during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In a matter of days, many students in Canada saw their institutions close and move courses online, many students with jobs or summer work opportunities saw them disappear, and the return to normal student life is still very much unknown.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada has stepped up its support for students. Many students who were already working are covered by the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the remaining students should be covered by the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) which provides \$1,250 a month for any post-secondary student or graduate who is not earning at least \$1,000 a month between May and August of 2020. There is an additional \$750 top up for students with dependents and students with disabilities. When September rolls around, Canadian post-secondary students will have more access to student financial aid than ever before from the federal government. Canada Student Grants, which provide

up-front, needs-based grants to low- and middle-income students will increase from \$3,000 to \$6,000, and weekly loan limits will increase from \$210 to \$350 per week during the 34-week study period.¹ As an organization representing students, we believe these investments are necessary and will help many post-secondary students stay in-study during a time where traditional sources of revenue for tuition and living expenses are severely jeopardized.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2020/04/support-for-students-and-recent-graduates-impacted-by-covid-19.html>

Priority Areas

Student Finances

Fortunately, due to Statistics Canada running data collection on COVID-19 impacts on post-secondary students, a snapshot of student perceptions about their financial situation was captured both before and after the April 22nd, 2020 student support announcement. The announcement of the CESB along with changes to the Canada Student Loan Program did decrease students' concern about their financial situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, a full 71% of students report having any type of financial concern with almost half of students worried about how they will pay for tuition come September.

Table 1: Statistics Canada - Post-secondary Student Financial Situation Concerns Before and After Announcement²

	All respondents	Responded April 19th-April 21st	Responded April 22nd-May 1st
Any financial concern	77%	82%	71%
Using up savings	67%	73%	61%
Increased student debt	54%	61%	47%
Pay for next term's tuition	51%	56%	46%
Paying for current expenses	49%	55%	44%
Paying for next term's accommodations	49%	55%	43%

Student Employment

The federal government has also responded to the unprecedented levels of student unemployment by bolstering existing student employment programs to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure some students are able to find jobs, the Canada Summer Jobs Program will be providing support by increasing the wage subsidy to 100%, extending the end date for employment to February 28, 2021 and allowing employers to hire students on a part-time basis. The Student Work Placement Program is also making similar changes such as adding flexibility with start dates for positions beyond May 1st, 2020, the ability for students to work remotely, increased wage subsidies for SMEs and not-for-profits, and allowing post-secondary institutions to offer

positions to students. The amendments to these programs are certainly going to provide students with much needed work opportunities during the summer of 2020, but these programs alone will not be able to provide enough students with jobs to make a sizable difference in youth unemployment rates. Statistics Canada's survey on the impact of COVID-19 on post-secondary students demonstrates near unprecedented levels of unemployment for students. The labour participation rate of post-secondary students is now down to 29.8% when measuring students between the ages of 20 and 24. This is a substantial drop from the 52.5% it was only a few months ago in February.³ Students who were not working but had their opportunities disappear did not fare any

² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200512/dq200512a-eng.htm?HPA=1>

³ Ibid

better. In March, roughly two-thirds of students had firm summer employment plans in place. As of the start of May, only 13% of respondents still had their summer employment plans moving forward as planned. This monumental blow to the employment fortunes of students is why

Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has no end in sight, and this is creating immense uncertainty about what September will look like when Canadian post-secondary students return to school. Some major universities in Canada have announced that classes will be conducted online for at least the fall semester. While this is a good decision for student safety during the pandemic, it does raise specific questions about the accessibility of that experience. The Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) ranks Canada in the top 10 for most expensive countries for broadband internet access when adjusted for cost of living.⁴ Digital learning, while necessary, will place the burden of establishing stable internet connections for learning on post-secondary students. This will place an undue burden on post-secondary students already struggling to afford the cost of post-secondary education. Furthermore, the accessibility of online learning without investments in improving digital

CASA firmly stands by the necessity of the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit and the related increases in available student financial aid come this September. This is plain and simple going to be one of the hardest summers for student employment on record.

infrastructure will create a divide between urban and rural students. While internet access is broadly available in Canada, high upload and download speeds are not. According to the CRTC in a 2015 report, 100% of urban residents and 90% of rural residents had access to internet speeds of 1.5 to 4.9 Mbps.⁵ However, that internet speed is unlikely going to be sustainable for educational purposes due to the need to access audio and video content, and share and download files. When speed requirements get as high as 10 and 15.9 Mbps, only 64% of rural residents have access to broadband that fast compared to 100% of urban residents.⁶ If online learning continues to be required due to COVID-19, then significant efforts must be made to ensure students have sufficient access to high quality internet. Sufficient internet access is critical to sustaining high quality education in a digital setting.

⁴ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/oecd-communications-outlook-2013_comms_outlook-2013-en#WJDeRLYrlgo#page1

⁵ <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/policymonitoring/2016/cmr5.htm#a5>

⁶ Ibid

Recommendations

In order to ensure that post-secondary students in Canada continue to be appropriately supported during the COVID-19 pandemic, CASA recommends the federal government do the following:

- » CASA recommends that the Government of Canada consider extending changes to the Canada Student Loan Program to help alleviate persistent student financial concerns. Specifically, extend the six-month interest-free moratorium on federal student loan payments which is in place until September 30, 2020.
- » CASA recommends that the Government of Canada work to ensure all post-secondary students have sufficient access to reliable and high-speed internet, which will enable them to succeed in a digital learning environment.

Our Members



About CASA

Established in 1995, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit, student organization composed of 23 student associations representing 275,000 post-secondary students from coast to coast. Through its partnership with the Quebec Students Union (QSU), CASA presents a national student voice to the federal government. CASA advocates for a Canadian post-secondary education system that is accessible, affordable, innovative and of the highest quality.



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