



Students and the Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief submitted by the **Canadian Federation of Students** to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Canadian Federation of Students



ABOUT US

The Canadian Federation of Students-Fédération canadienne des étudiantes et étudiants (CFS-FCEE) is Canada's largest and oldest national student organization, representing over 550,000 college and university students at an undergraduate and graduate level from across the country. Our mission is to achieve our ultimate goal - a system of post-secondary education that is accessible to all, of high quality, nationally planned and that recognises the legitimacy of student representation and the validity of student rights.

BACKGROUND

The State of Post-Secondary Education

Before COVID-19, the Canadian post-secondary education sector was already heading towards a crisis. Skyrocketing tuition fees have led students to take on insurmountable debt in order to obtain the education they need for 70% of new jobs on today's market. Because of a lack of a national vision for post-secondary education, tuition fees across the country vary from an average of \$2,951 in Newfoundland to \$8,438 in Nova-Scotia¹, and increase substantially every year. International students, who have to pay 3 to 4 times more than their domestic counterparts, saw their unregulated fees going up 7.6% in 2019-2020.² The student debt crisis has reached a peak, with the average student debt after a four-year degree being \$28,000³, which takes an average of 10 years to repay. A student who takes on student debt in order to pay for their post-secondary education will pay \$6,740⁴ more in interest than a student who is able to pay upfront. Funding for Indigenous students, whose right to education is a treaty right, has been capped for decades, and it is estimated that up to 10,000 Indigenous learners are unable to pursue their studies because of lack of financial support. On top of financial stressors, young people are increasingly experiencing mental health issues, for which they are receiving inadequate support on their campus.

Chronic public underfunding, which began in the 1990s when crucial social transfers to the provinces were reduced, and an increase in the corporatization of our campuses, is responsible for the state we are in. Students are being asked to take on the burden of financing the post-secondary education system, saddling them with ballooning debt that will keep them from meeting life milestones like owning a home, starting a family or launching a business, until much later in life. Post-secondary education benefits everyone and should be treated as a public good. It is only through a strong, coordinated effort on the part of the federal government and provinces that we will be able to build the system of post-secondary education students, their families and their communities need and deserve.

Government Aid

On April 22, 2020, the Prime Minister announced his government's plan for students and new grads affected by COVID-19⁵. The \$9 billion support package includes the following:

- The Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), a guaranteed income of \$1,250 per month (\$2,000 for students with dependents or who have a disability), from May to August, for students and recent graduates who are unable to find summer employment;
- The Canada Student Service Grant, which will provide students who volunteer over the summer up to \$5,000 towards their studies;
- The expansion of the Canada Summer Jobs and other existing federal employment, skills development and youth programming to provide up to 116,000 students jobs;
- The doubling of Canada Student Grants for full-time and part-time students in 2020-2021;
- The broadening of eligibility for student financial aid by removing expected student's and spouse's contributions for 2020-2021;
- The increase of funding available through the Canada Student Loans Program;
- The increase of ear-marked financial aid for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in 2020-2021;
- The extension of federal graduate research scholarships and postdoctoral fellowships and the increase of existing federal research grants through the federal granting councils, as well as the increase in work opportunities for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows through the National Research Council of Canada.

Additional measures for students include access to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) for those who were working at the time of the shutdown, and the removal of the restriction on work hours

1 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190904/dq190904b-eng.htm>

2 Ibid

3 National Graduates Survey, 2015, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710003601>.

4 Calculated at a fixed rate of 2.45% over 10 years through the Government of Canada Loan Repayment Estimator <https://tools.canlearn.ca/csigs-scpse/cln-cln/crp-lrc/af.nindex-eng.do>.

5 <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/04/22/support-students-and-new-grads-affected-covid-19>

for students (who can usually work up to 20 hours a week during their studies), provided that they work in a sector deemed essential.

The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the already dire state of post-secondary education in the country. According to a joint survey commissioned by the CFS and the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and conducted by Abascus Data at the end of April, two-thirds of students indicated that their summer employment plans had been affected by the pandemic. According to a Statistics Canada survey conducted around the same time, more than half of working students had lost employment and a quarter had fewer hours. For students who weren't working but had secured a summer job, 31% had lost that job and 40% had their start date delayed. Finally, 49% of students who had strong prospects for summer employment lost those prospects⁶.

This has had significant impacts on students' financial situation. Of the students surveyed by Abascus Data, 72% said COVID-19 had impacted their own financial situation, while 67% said it had affected their family's financial situation. Half of students said the pandemic will make it harder for them to afford tuition fees in the fall, while 1 in 5 said it would be much more difficult. Women and people of colour were more likely to indicate that it would be more difficult to afford school. According to Abascus Data, up to 30% of students surveyed could change their plans to attend university or college in the fall, with the ability to afford tuition fees and the prospects of a mostly remote or virtual university of college experience being the main drivers behind this decision.

The government's student aid package is providing some financial relief, and students are certainly grateful to be able to pay for basic expenses like rent and groceries over the coming months. But the amount provided is not enough to cover the average \$6,476 in tuition fees for domestic students and \$29,714 in tuition fees for international students (which are going up this year across the country, despite the dire financial situation students are finding themselves in), on top of textbooks, rent, groceries and other mandatory expenses they will have to incur over the coming year if they are able to continue pursuing their studies at all.

This is a crucial time to strengthen our public services, such as education, to help us recover from this crisis and propel us into a fair and just future. To this end, we are presenting six recommendations that the federal government should take to ensure all students are protected, and to address the long-standing issues of this sector.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendation #1: Universally accessible post-secondary education
- Recommendation #2: Eliminating interest rates on Canada Student Loans Program
- Recommendation #3: Access to education for Indigenous learners
- Recommendation #4: Fairness for international students
- Recommendation #5: Graduate students access to education
- Recommendation #6: Better mental health supports for students

Recommendation #1: Universally accessible post-secondary education

The deep federal cuts made to post-secondary education in the 1980s and 1990s were never restored. In most provinces, austerity has been downloaded onto students in the form of massive tuition fee increases and using international students as cash injections. COVID-19 has driven the system to a breaking point. According to the Abascus Data survey, 70% of students, who rely on summer employment to pay for their tuition, experienced a change in their summer jobs plan by either losing the job, having their hours reduced, or not being able to find a job at all. Even after the announcement of the Canadian Student Benefit Program (CESB), 61% students are very or extremely concerned about using up their savings⁷. Moreover, 30% of students have indicated that they are reconsidering enrolling in classes in the

⁶ <https://www.caut.ca/latest/2020/05/survey-post-secondary-students-reconsidering-fall-semester-plans-wake-covid-19>

⁷ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00016-eng.htm>

fall, with the affordability of tuition fees and the prospects of an online semester being the main drivers behind this decision.⁸

Ensuring Canada's competitiveness to defeat the virus and foster a sustainable future requires educated, active participants in our economy and knowledge production. We need to unleash the potential of the most talented members of our society — not just the wealthiest. To achieve this goal, the ongoing underfunding of post-secondary education must be addressed. We recognize the financial relief of the \$9 billion aid package for students; which is only \$1.7 billion short of providing free education for everyone. Moving forward, ensuring a 50/50 cost sharing model between the federal and provincial governments to post-secondary education will build a strong foundation that better equips us to respond to future crises, and makes Canada a leading country in research, medicine, and beyond.

Recommendations:

1. Establish an ongoing transfer to the provinces and territories to eliminate tuition fees. The federal government would assume a 50% share of the cost, while provincial and territorial authorities would commit to their share of this cost and observe the proposed Post-Secondary Education Act.
2. Restore federal transfers to provinces and territories for post-secondary education to 1992 levels to address the \$2.29 billion cut in 1996, and increase this funding based on enrollment/inflation growth that has since resulted. With current federal funding at \$4.3 billion, an annual federal funding gap of \$2.6 billion remains.
3. Invest in reskilling and retraining of programs to respond to the ongoing crisis and foster a renewable energy economy grounded on the principles of a Just Recovery for All⁹

Recommendation #2: Eliminating interest rates on Canada Student Loans Program

By 2016, the total public student debt in Canada had reached \$36 billion, of which \$18 billion was owed to the Canada Student Loan Program (CSLP), and public student debt was increasing by nearly \$1 million per day¹⁰. While progress has been made, most notably in Budget 2019 when the government reduced floating rates from prime plus 2.5% to prime, and in one of the government's COVID-19 measures freezing interest on student loans, the principle of charging any interest on student loans remains unsettling. Fifty percent of post-secondary graduates accrued debt at the time of graduation, with an average of \$28,000 after a four-year program¹¹. Currently, even with the expansion of the Canada Grants Program from \$3,000 to \$6,000, 47% of students have indicated that they are very or extremely concerned to take on more student debt as a result of COVID-19 and more than 4 in 10 are concerned about their ability to pay for next term's tuition, keep up with their living expenses, or afford next term's accommodation costs¹².

These numbers show that while the cost of post-secondary education has been increasingly out of reach, it has now reached a breaking point where students can no longer support themselves throughout their studies. Students in Canada should not be forced to choose between paying their rent or continuing their studies, nor should they be expected to be saddled with student debt to obtain an education increasingly required in our modern job market.

Recommendations:

1. Support students who have incurred debt to pursue their degree by eliminating interest rates on direct loans through the CSLP and providing Stage 2 assistance for all CSLP borrowers five years after graduation (which involves reducing the principal of a loan holder's debt).

⁸ <https://www.caut.ca/latest/2020/05/survey-post-secondary-students-reconsidering-fall-semester-plans-wake-covid-19>

⁹ justrecoveryforall.ca

¹⁰ http://www.osfi-bsif.gc.ca/Eng/Docs/CSLP_2017.p

¹¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00016-eng.htm>

¹² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00016-eng.htm>

Recommendation #3: Access to education for Indigenous learners

Post-secondary education is a right of Indigenous people. This right was guaranteed in several foundational nation-to-nation treaties, first asserted in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, and was reaffirmed as a constitutional right in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982. Moreover, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls for action on Indigenous students' access to postsecondary education, including for the government to "provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education." While recent investments are significant, the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) has been underfunded for over 20 years and this has created a serious backlog of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students trying to access post-secondary education. The \$75.2 million dedicated for a distinctions-based support provides some relief during this pandemic, but the fact remains that Indigenous learners must be granted free education as stipulated in Treaty rights, in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was endorsed by Canada in 2010, and in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls for action.

Moreover, during this crisis it is more important than ever to prioritize the preservation of Indigenous culture, history, and languages as a fundamental component to reconciliation. Today, only 8.4 percent of Indigenous youth know and speak their traditional language, and at public post-secondary institutions across the country, access to Indigenous languages and culture are often not in the syllabus. As courses move online, it is the responsibility of public colleges and universities to teach Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners about the history, culture, and languages of the First Peoples of Turtle Island.

Recommendation:

1. Invest additional funds to those allocated in Budget 2019 to fully address the backlog in applicants to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP).
2. Assess current funding levels to new Métis and Inuit post-secondary funding programs to ensure that these programs are fully funded according to demand.
3. Implement a 50% increase to federal funds dedicated to Indigenous language revitalization for fiscal year 2020-21, where funding continues to be dedicated to First Nations, First Nations-led and mandated institutions, and First Nations post-secondary institutions.

Recommendation #4: Fairness for international students

Collectively, international students make a substantial economic contribution. The total annual expenditure by international students and visiting friends and family stood at \$11.4 billion in 2014. Every year, spending by international students supports over 100,000 full-time equivalent jobs¹³. Moreover, international students contribute to the diversity of our campuses, providing additional points of view and critical perspectives. What these contributions illustrate is how vital it is for Canada to distinguish itself as an attractive destination for students from around the world. An important aspect of this is to protect and support international students living in Canada while they endure the negative financial effects of this global pandemic, especially when families abroad are also experiencing financial struggles. In addition, post-secondary institutions throughout the country continue to raise differential fees; such as the University of Guelph¹⁴, Dalhousie University¹⁵, and the University of Manitoba¹⁶, to name a few. This unfortunate reality, mixed with the stress of being away from home and not knowing when it will be safe to return, is generating wellness struggles and a greater need for job security.

Every day that goes by where the federal government fails international students by not including them in the CESB is a day where a student is risking hunger and homelessness, and a day where Canada is jeopardizing its reputation as an attractive post-secondary destination. This crisis is worsened as the

¹³ https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2016/index.aspx?lang=eng&fbclid=IwAR3JV6teChJrqlfCfQc7do0fMb_zLfWidn_ljzFKToEVMc0KYI27C_Q-1Smw

¹⁴ <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/05/27/the-university-of-guelph-is-hiking-tuition-for-international-students-amid-covid-19-and-they-arent-happy.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/universities-tuition-increases-nova-scotia-education-post-secondary-fees-1.5588405>

¹⁶ <https://globalnews.ca/news/6965987/university-of-manitoba-2020-21-budget-tuition/#:~:text=The%20University%20of%20Manitoba%20has%20approved%20its%20%24674.6%2Dmillion%202020,increase%20to%20university%2Dwide%20fees.>

Canada Summer Jobs program still excludes international students – a restriction that can, and should, be removed. Moreover, the health and wellness of students studying in Canada should be a public consideration. As such, we recommend that as part of its duties under the Canada Health Act, the federal government require provinces and territories to provide the same public health care coverage to international students as other Canadian residents.

Recommendation:

1. Extend eligibility for the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit to international students.
2. Extend eligibility for the Canada Summer Jobs program to international students.
3. As part of its duties under the Canada Health Act, require provinces and territories to provide the same public health care coverage to international students as other Canadian residents.
4. Automatically renew visas and study permit applications so that SINs do not expire and international students are able to work.

Recommendation #5: Graduate students' access to education

For many graduate students, the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted access to resources that may be essential to progress through their academic and research requirements. Despite this lack of access to academic resources, many institutions are still requiring graduate students to pay spring and summer tuition fees. In the face of this unparalleled economic hardship, it is imperative that graduate students are not made financially responsible for facilities, services, resources, and supervisions to which they have limited to no access. Graduate students are looking at a decimated job market with very little support, as many cannot benefit from the expansion of the Canada Summer Jobs program; which excludes international students and students over 30. The federal government can work with universities and provincial governments to subsidize the waiver of spring and summer 2020 tuition fees for graduate students.

Moreover, graduate students have to grapple with restricted access to laboratories, fieldwork, resources, and connection with international networks due to travel restrictions. This, paired with the fact that many graduate students are active caretakers for dependents, or have now become the key source of childcare in their households, means that they may no longer have the time or uninterrupted space available to dedicate to their academic work in the coming months. Financial uncertainty and pressures to progress through academic requirements are compromising the health and wellbeing of graduate students and is counterproductive. By working with Canada's tri-council agencies, the government can alleviate these pressures by providing fully-funded extensions to scholarships for all graduate students affected by the current crisis.

Recommendations:

1. Work with Canadian universities and provincial governments to subsidize the waiver of spring/summer 2020 tuition fees for graduate students through increased public funding.
2. Work with Canada's Tri-councils: the Natural Sciences & Engineering Research Council (NSERC); the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council (SSHRC); the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR); and universities, to provide fully-funded extensions to scholarships for all graduate students disadvantaged by the current crisis.

Recommendation #6: Better mental health supports for students

In recent years, concerns surrounding the mental health of post-secondary students have increased, with national, cross-sectional surveys revealing a high prevalence of stress, symptoms of psychological distress, and diagnosed mental illnesses among students¹⁷. Post-secondary students can be at increased risk for mental health deterioration due to the multitude of stressors experienced within the post-secondary setting. While some degree of stress is to be expected, chronic stress is highly correlated with negative mental health outcomes and has been shown to have a negative impact on students' academic

¹⁷ <https://www.acha.org/>

achievement¹⁸. COVID-19 has exacerbated these stressors and added other challenges, such as changes to the learning environment, isolation, fear and worry about one's own health and the health of one's loved ones, to name just a few.

Recommendations:

1. Allocate \$300 million over two years to improve on-campus mental health services. This fund, modeled after the Post-Secondary Institutions Strategic Investment Fund, would allow post-secondary institutions to apply for federal grants to improve on-campus mental health services.
2. Create a dedicated mental health stream to ensure ongoing mental health promotion and prompt treatment of mental illnesses, through a nationwide program in accordance with the principles and criteria of the Canada Health Act.
3. Create a single-payer national pharmacare plan to lower costs and improve health outcomes.

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