



**GOING  
FURTHER  
TOGETHER**

**POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AS A  
KEY TO CANADA'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY**





# STUDENTS WORKING TOGETHER

ABOUT THE  
FEDERAL STUDENT  
ADVOCACY ALLIANCE

Founded in 2020, the Federal Student Advocacy Alliance (FSAA) is an organisation comprised of 33 student associations from across Western Canada, representing 281,000 student voices. The Alliance is a partnership between the Alberta Students' Executive Council, British Columbia Federation of Students, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic Students' Association.

Together, the Alliance strives to advocate for an accessible, resilient, and world-class Canadian post-secondary education system that prioritizes the diverse needs of today's students across Canada.

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# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

*The advocacy goals of the Federal Student Advocacy Alliance are set democratically by student representatives through their respective provincial organisations.*

*The recommendations in this document would create enhanced access to financial assistance for low- and middle-income Canadians, restore necessary funding to colleges, polytechnics and universities, and reduce financial barriers to education for all learners. These actions are vital to the government's economic recovery plan by ensuring access to high-quality education for everyone.*

## STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Maintain the current amount of the Canada Student Grant beyond 2023, which was doubled in 2020-21, and reform the student loan procedure.

## EXPEDITED PATHWAYS TO PERMANENT RESIDENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT GRADUATES

Create an expedited pathway to permanent residency and redesign citizenship processes that can be pursued without legal representation.

## ENSURE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HIGHSPEED INTERNET FOR ALL

Invest in infrastructure to ensure connectivity across Canada and ensure the rates for appropriate internet speeds is affordable for all.

## INCREASE ACCESS FOR INDIGENOUS LEARNERS

Increase funding to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program and ensure the application is accessible and simplified for all applicants.

## EXPAND PAID STUDENT INTERNSHIPS AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Create streamlined student job placement programs that are accessible to a larger pool of students and businesses year-round.

Canada is in the midst of an economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has changed the nature of work, as well as, the requirements needed to be successfully employed. Statistics Canada research shows that people of colour, women, and youth were hardest hit by the economic downturn and have seen the slowest recovery to pre-pandemic levels of employment and earning capacity. In times like these, education is a crucial tool that governments must use to spur economic recovery by training or re-training those who have lost their jobs and those seeking skills to increase their employability. The post-COVID-19 economy will look very different than its predecessor, and it is imperative that all Canadians are equipped with the skills needed to fill labour market demands.

However, students face challenges while trying to attain post-secondary education and after they graduate. We ask the government to prioritize enhancing financial assistance for low- and middle-income Canadians, invest in Indigenous learners, ensure affordable high-speed internet access for all, create a robust student job program, and make post-graduate immigration processes clearer.

Together we can reduce barriers to education for all learners, tackle poverty and inequality, contribute to good-paying jobs in all regions of the country, and ensure people from all backgrounds can have the opportunity to fully participate in the workforce. Together we can go further.



# STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

The Canada Student Financial Assistance (CSFA) program provides needs-based loans and grants to eligible Canadians to assist with achieving their educational goals. In the 2018-19 academic year, this program helped support over 700,000 students to the tune of \$5.2 billion dollars.<sup>1</sup> This investment allows students, many of whom are marginalized, to attend school. Of those surveyed, 40-55% identify as a single parent, Indigenous, mature, disabled, or as new Canadians; they say that without the financial supports of the CSFA program they would not have graduated.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt this program helps people who otherwise would not have had the means to attend school. Many students share stories about how they are Canada Student Loan Program recipients and first-generation college or university students. The program is important and continuous investment is critical in ensuring education is accessible to future Canadians.

Although the loan program opens the doors for over 500,000 students to attend post-secondary education, there is a downside: ever-increasing student debt in Canada. The average federal loan balance for a student leaving school in 2019-20 was \$13,549, an increase of 10% since 2011-12.<sup>3</sup> This is despite the fact there has been a 153% increase in grants over the same period.<sup>4</sup> Even though there has been a massive investment in grants, it has not dropped the average student loan debt held by borrowers.

Student debt makes it challenging for graduates to participate in our economy in ways young people have traditionally been able to. Student debt combined with being shut out of the housing market, skyrocketing rent, and other costs of living increases are forcing young people to delay milestones like homeownership and starting a family. This divide is increasingly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Evidence shows that intergenerational income mobility has declined significantly, which is furthering the gap between classes.<sup>5</sup>

In 2020, the Federal government announced a doubling of the federal grant program, which increased the maximum grant from \$3,000 to \$6,000 and has been extended until 2023. In addition, those in repayment for their student loans will save \$4,000 dollars on average once interest on student loans is eliminated. This is welcome news to students, as young people have been overrepresented in the economic sectors that suffered the most during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> We would ask that this additional investment be made permanent to assist with dropping the average of student loan debt. If student debt can be lowered, we can begin to reverse some of the burdens on students and expedite their ability to participate in the Canadian economy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Maintain the doubling of grants in the Canadian Student Financial Assistance program beyond 2023;

Review the formula that calculates unmet needs and ensure that it is based on the current economic realities of students and their economic recovery after the pandemic.

# PERMANENT RESIDENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Canada depends on immigration to meet its replacement population goals, as well as achieve its workforce and labour targets to sustain economic growth. In its 2019-2024 international education strategy, the federal government recognises that in the next decade immigration is projected to account for 100% of net growth in the workforce, up from 75% currently.<sup>7</sup>

Not only do international students make excellent candidates for permanent residency, but many would also like to stay after their studies. The Canadian Bureau for International Education found 60% of international students surveyed intended to apply for permanent residence, and 70% of respondents indicated their intention to work in Canada after their studies.<sup>8</sup> However, the current system of immigration to Canada is overly complicated and challenging for new graduates to navigate.

Getting enough relevant work experience is a significant barrier international students face when applying for permanent residency. The Federal Skilled Workers and Canadian Experience Class programs require at least one year of full-time (or an equivalent number of hours in part-time work) experience in a NOC 0, A, or B job. However, opportunities for that work experience in Canada are hard to find: 43.6% of international students have no Canadian work experience, and those who do work make less than \$20,000 per year on average.<sup>9</sup>

International students may only work up to 20 hours per week off campus which adds additional barriers in acquiring the coveted NOC 0, A, or B jobs. International students are also excluded from federally funded student employment programs (such as the Canada Summer Jobs program and various work placement programs) because their temporary status in Canada does not allow for a long-term connection to the labour market.<sup>10</sup>



The Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) supposedly exists to help newly graduated international students to acquire work visas after completing an approved degree or certificate program from a recognized post-secondary institution. However, this is a long process, complicated by the aforementioned issues international students face in attaining Canadian work experience. The 2008 cohort of PGWP participants show that it took ten years for 73% of the cohort to become permanent residents.<sup>11</sup> With the numerous provincial and federal programs for immigration that exist, the processes can become overwhelming and confusing for international students.

Further, applicants face immense pressure to complete their application with no errors, while burdened with fear of being rejected, or worse, deported. The application process is so confusing that many turn to hiring immigration lawyers or consultants that charge a premium. The Federal Government could help by streamlining programs and creating an easier system for applications that includes a transparent appeal process.

Canada is reliant on the immigration of skilled workers who want to live and learn in our country. International students are the perfect candidates for being permanent residents: they have received a Canadian credential, made social connections in their communities, and started the process of making a life for themselves in Canada. Creating a streamlined process for our international graduates to become permanent residents will help make graduates feel wanted and important in this country.

**60%**

of international students studying in Canada intend to apply for permanent residence in Canada.

**70%**

of international students studying in Canada intend to work in Canada after completing their studies.

**100%**

immigration is projected to account for 100% of net growth in the workforce over the next decade.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Create an international student pathway to permanent residency that does not require experience in NOC 0, A, and B jobs, but instead awards points for participation in activities like volunteering, internships, co-ops, or part-time work;

Allow international students to work more than 20 hours off campus, so long as they maintain their student status, affording them the opportunity to take advantage of all student job programs;

Create a more transparent and navigable system of application, including allowing for appeal processes, so that it is easier to apply without the assistance of for-profit immigration specialists.

# UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO HIGHSPEED INTERNET

Internet access is no longer a 'nice-to-have' but an essential for all. For students, this has never been more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students are forced to go to fast-food restaurants and city building parking lots in the hopes of finding an internet connection suitable enough to participate in classes remotely.

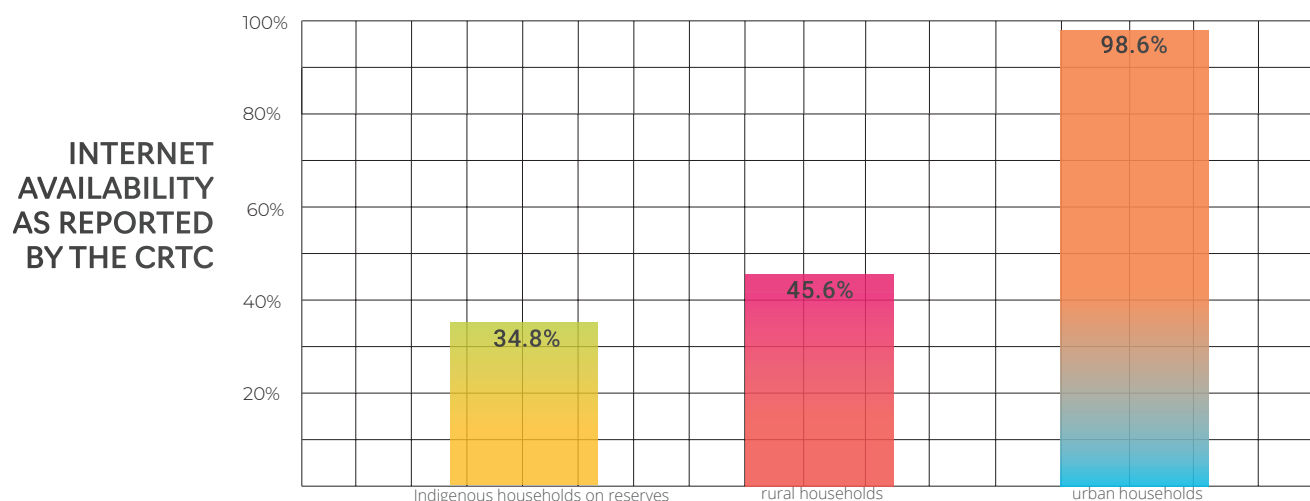
In 2021, the British Columbia Federation of Students held a Symposium about learning during COVID-19; access to technology and the internet surfaced as a deficiency that greatly affected students, and they identified it as an area where they are needing more support.<sup>12</sup> It is not just school; more and more public and government services are being provided solely online and this is not likely to change as we move out of the pandemic. This causes those without adequate access to internet to fall further behind as it continues to exacerbate socio-economic inequities, including those related to business opportunities, employment, education, and physical and mental health.<sup>13</sup>

There are two main concerns surrounding connectivity: the availability of the internet and the availability of the appropriate speed. Though these issues are felt in urban communities, they are far more prevalent in rural communities. The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC) found that broadband internet services are available to 98.6% of urban households, 45.6% of rural households, and only 34.8% of Indigenous households on reserves.<sup>14</sup> Internet access also needs to be of an appropriate speed for students to participate in an online class, download articles, or watch videos. Many experts suggest an internet speed of 100/mbps is appropriate for multi-device homes, but according to the CRTC, only 40.8% of rural communities and 32.5% of First Nations reserves have access to adequate internet speeds.<sup>15</sup> This disparity is further aggravating the issue of 'Brain Drain' – the migration of young people to urban cities. The Trade Board of Canada cited the lack of highspeed internet and post-secondary institutions as a major problem when trying to build skills in the North.<sup>16</sup> Connectivity is just one obstacle, but an important one. The lack of accessible internet only further complicates the delivery of skill-building opportunities like training and post-secondary education, forcing people out of rural settings to access those opportunities. Further compounding the accessibility issue is the affordability of internet



services. In 2019, Canada ranked fifth highest in terms of internet services prices<sup>17</sup> and in 2021 internet prices have risen 6% on average.<sup>18</sup> Combined with the ever-increasing cost of living, this causes significant strain on Canadians, especially students who are already feeling the weight of low wages and the cost of education. Some of this cost relates to the 2021-181 Telecom Decision of the CRTC, where they reversed their own decision on its own aggregated wholesale service rates decided on in 2019,<sup>19</sup> making it more expensive for small service providers to purchase access to incumbents' networks for resale. In fact, 86% of the current home internet market is provided by incumbent providers – Rogers, Telus, or Bell. Without regulations these big three companies offer broadly the same service for similar pricing structures that keep Canadians paying some of the highest fees when compared to other G7 nations.

Internet access needs to be considered an essential service for all Canadians. Without access to steady, high-speed, affordable internet, young people can fall behind in digital literacy skills, in their studies, and find it more difficult to access essential public services. If we want students to succeed in their studies, we need to ensure they have adequate internet access to do so.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Reverse the 2021 CRTC ruling on wholesale internet pricing and support more independent competition in the market;

Ensure all students have access to affordable, fast, and reliable internet and provide financial assistance to those who need it;

Support the expansion of free Wi-Fi networks across rural and Indigenous communities.

# INCREASE FUNDING TO THE POST-SECONDARY STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM

The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) was created in the 1970s to provide financial assistance for Indigenous learners to attend post-secondary education. In 2019-20, the federal budget allocated \$320 million over five years, and we applaud this government for their investments of an additional \$150 million over two years. However, the program has been hamstrung for decades and has not kept pace with the increase in learners and the sky-rocketing cost of living and education.

There continues to be a large gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners attaining a post-secondary degree. Using 2015 graduate numbers, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) found that another 78,000 Indigenous graduates are required to close the attainment gap, which would have required an increase of 80.6% of current funding.<sup>20</sup> This gap is due to years of piecemeal funding increases and a cap of only 2% in funding increases that have allowed the program's funds to be far lower than necessitated. For the 2022-23 fiscal period, the AFN has identified a conservative estimate of \$7.27 billion over five years to address the backlog of students waiting to access PSSSP. This would ensure that cohorts graduating secondary school in this fiscal year will be able to access the program now.<sup>21</sup>

One of the deficiencies in the management of this program has been the lack of appropriate data collection. An audit of Indigenous Services Canada determined that the department failed to collect data such as post-secondary graduation rates and information that would compare the education attainment level of Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.<sup>22</sup> Without this crucial data there is no way to track the success or failure of the program and it burdens Indigenous communities and organisations to bear the responsibility of this data collection.

Finally, this program and the other boutique programs that exist to support Indigenous students in attaining post-secondary education are complicated to navigate and challenging to access. Many programs are only open to those who have status, which can be complicated for many to achieve based on how the historical and current treatment of Indigenous people has displaced many from their families and communities. Often, information about these programs is housed on multiple federal and provincial websites that can be hard to navigate without support. We call on the government to work with their provincial counterparts to create one website that would act as a portal for Indigenous peoples interested in attending a post-secondary institution.

Post-secondary education can be a strong force for raising people up and breaking the intergenerational cycles of poverty in this country. However, our system is far from equitable and will move further and further out of reach for Indigenous peoples unless action is taken. This was recognized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which calls upon the federal government "to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education."<sup>23</sup> This action is only one of 94 other actions that must happen to begin the long and continuous process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Implement the Assembly of First Nations' call to allocate an additional, immediate investment of \$661.2M over five years, for annual ongoing funding to support the implementation of Indigenous-led local, regional and Treaty-based post-secondary education models;

Work with provincial counterparts to create a central website that contains all the necessary information and supports that exist to assist Indigenous learners before, during, and after their educational journey;

Work with Indigenous leadership to ensure that the Federal government and its departments are fully supporting the needs of Indigenous learners, including appropriate data collection and auditing.



# SUPPORT EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING BY INCREASING ACCESS TO STUDENT FOCUSED JOB PROGRAMS

*The Canadian labour market has evolved rapidly over the last few decades. As our country's labour market needs change, post-secondary education and young Canadians become an important puzzle piece in supporting a diverse and thriving economy.*

However, young people are often the most negatively affected by changes in the labour market for numerous reasons: they are often working part-time jobs in precarious industries, and have low seniority compared to older workers. In 2019, only 67.3% of those aged 15-30 were employed compared to just over 83% of those aged 31-54.<sup>24</sup> We saw the impact of this tenuous employment in the pandemic where youth employed in industries like accommodations, food services, recreation, and retail lost their jobs en masse. On average, young workers were two times more likely to be unemployed than their older counterparts.<sup>25</sup> Economic recovery for young people will take time and government should pursue every path available to help speed up that recovery.

Initiatives like the Canada Summer Jobs program, which is designed to provide quality work experience to students and respond to labour market demands, is a clear example of a system in need of reform to better meet the needs of Canadian students. The program's 2022 intake is rife with limitations that impact the effectiveness of this program: students can be no older than 30, must work a minimum of 30 hours, and the jobs must end by the start of the following school year. Not only do these restrictions provide limitations to businesses, especially around the work hours and end of employment, but the hour requirement prevents international students from applying. Furthermore, limiting the program to students under 30 excludes over 400,000 students from accessing these opportunities.<sup>26</sup>

We recommend the creation of one, streamlined, entry point for student jobs by combining programs such as the Canada Summer Jobs program and others such as the Canada Federal Student Worker program. It is increasingly important to have a diverse labour market and these programs need to be as flexible as possible to fulfill current labour market demands. Students are no longer traditional full-time learners who are only seeking employment between May and August. By eliminating the end date of jobs, the program will also assist industries who need support beyond the summer months.

Investments in jobs for students can help alleviate multiple issues they face. In adapting existing programs to create a streamlined student jobs program, the government can promote the experiential learning opportunities critical for young people to attain, as co-ops and work placement programs are not offered at all institutions. By covering a portion of wages – the largest expense to a business – small and medium-sized businesses will be able to access the help they need to fulfill staffing shortages. Finally, students with more work experience upon graduation have an increased chance of finding good jobs faster and are less likely to rely on the use of programs like repayment assistance or fully defaulting on their loan payments.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Combine student job placement programs into one streamlined program that is easy for students, employers, and institutions to understand;

Remove the age and hour cap to allow flexibility that would benefit students and employers;

Increase incentives for employers in the NOC 0, A, B class professions so students can get the valuable work experience necessary to secure employment after graduation.

# ENDNOTES

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