



February 12, 2021

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
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2021 Ontario Budget Submission by the Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of life across Ontario. Post-secondary education (PSE) is no exception. In these unprecedented times, students have met many challenges. They have stayed home when asked to by the government to stop the spread of the pandemic. They have shifted to online learning when asked to accommodate public health measures, wrote exams in their bedrooms, have had research projects cancelled, became caregivers while meeting the demands of coursework, and managed their mental health while lacking much-needed supports. They have been laid off from their jobs, struggled to pay for rent and food while meeting OSAP payments - this, of course, for those who are even eligible for financial aid. The challenges are too long to list, yet so often, it is Ontario's students who are forgotten when our government addresses this crisis. Students have done their part but are still waiting a year later for needed support as daily case numbers remain unacceptably high.

But make no mistake, the pandemic has also exposed the long-standing major issues in Ontario's PSE system. Students and graduates were already struggling with skyrocketing tuition fees and large loan repayments and now also face unemployment, financial uncertainty, insolvency, houselessness, food insecurity, increasing mental health needs, economic instability, and more. Since 2008, per-student funding in Ontario has been behind the rest of Canada and has continued this steady decline, leaving the province in last place nationally (roughly 40 per cent less than the national average of \$12,300 in the rest of Canada). Our world-class colleges and universities are faltering as Ontario now ranks last in Canada when it comes to the student-to-faculty ratio. Tuition fees in Ontario are ninth in the affordability of tuition, with domestic undergraduate students paying, on average, \$8,000 dollars per year. Decades of chronic underfunding led colleges and universities to rely on tuition fee increases and exploiting international students to compensate for lack of public funding. This is at a time when nearly 70 per cent of jobs in Ontario require some level of post-secondary education; the province should be investing in students, rather than indebting them. Budget 2021 offers a chance for the government of Ontario to course correct and invest in our public institutions before we fall further behind.

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Colleges and universities are vital institutions within our communities and are key contributors to Ontario's economic, social, and cultural health. Students are the cornerstone to rebuild our economy post-pandemic. They are the foundation of our future and our collective recovery. We call on the provincial government to recognize the essential role students play in our society, now and in the future. There is no reconstructing our provincial economy without students. It is an economic necessity: put simply, high quality, well-funded, and accessible PSE is an essential precondition for Ontario to flourish post-pandemic.

The Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario is the province's largest and strongest advocate for students. We are the credible voice of Ontario students, representing more than 35 Federation member local students' unions in Ontario, uniting over 350,000 full-time and part-time students at colleges and universities. Our Federation provides students with an effective and united voice while creating space and opportunity for students across the province to join together to advocate for the highest quality post-secondary education. We believe in a just recovery that doesn't leave students behind. While there is a long list of recommendations to make (including many from [our submission](#) last year), we offer the following 10 recommendations for the 2021 Budget consultations as a modest starting point to investing in a just recovery for students:

1. Creation of a Tuition Fee Framework which aims to phase-out tuition for all with a gradual 25 per cent reduction over the next 4 years. This is the only way for a just recovery for students post-COVID19.
2. Reversal of the current Tuition Fee Framework and the dangerous Performance-Based funding model which will drastically affect public funding for smaller institutions, further the corporatization of PSE and negatively affect the diversity, research and fields of study offered.
3. Cancellation of all student debt, effectively abolishing the predatory practice of collecting interest from already struggling students. Students are struggling with this pandemic like never before, we need to support them to help rebuild our economy and not further encumber them.
4. The Provincial government must launch a holistic study on the beneficial impacts of OSAP grants to ensure students can fully participate in, and contribute to, the Canadian economy without financial barriers, immense debt loads, poverty and precarity and deteriorating mental health. Further, ensure part-time students (many of which were forced to this status because of COVID-19) are currently for OSAP. Transition OSAP from a loan to a grants based program.
5. Mandating in-depth data collected and public dissemination on First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and other race-based data to further address inequities in PSE (including enrollment and retention). A fully funded Transitional Year Program to support Indigenous learners in bridging between high school and Ontario's public postsecondary education system. Designated First Nations, Inuit and Métis student support services fund in order to create programs, such as, academic support services, mental health services, Elders in residence programs and culturally-specific programming.
6. Protect all students' right to organize by implementing legislative protections for college and university students' associations in Ontario. Drop the appeal of the Ontario Divisional

Court's decision having deemed the "Student Choice Initiative" unlawful, saving on further legal costs and enabling levy funded student unions and organizations to continue offering essential life-affirming services.

7. The province needs to pass a bill to ensure the training of mental health supports for staff and faculty. Further, if we are to take mental health seriously during this pandemic, there must be the elimination of out-of-pocket costs for counselling and psychiatric services. On campus services are already suffering due to lost revenues from the government's Student Choice Initiative.
8. The province needs to support the call for a national, public and universal pharmacare system as a fundamental resource for students and people facing increased barriers accessing services to both mental and physical health. This measure could save the province as high as \$1.9billion annually.
9. Completely eliminate differential tuition paid by International students to match that of domestic students immediately. These students are members of our communities and key parts of Ontario's future, they should not be treated as second class citizens. In the midst of a global pandemic, it is far past time to reinstate the Ontario Health Insurance Program for students with valid study permits. This must be done immediately and the government must abolish predatory for-profit programs like the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) and the College Health Insurance Plan (CHIP).
10. Adequately and meaningfully consult with sector stakeholders such as students, staff, faculty and all workers before introducing any government legislation or police initiatives affecting PSE.

The Canadian Federation of Students will be conducting its annual Provincial Lobby Week from Monday, March 1 - Friday, March 5, 2021. There will be an official 2021 Lobby Week Document produced by the Federation, please contact the Canadian Federation of Students - Ontario office to receive a copy.

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