

# A Better Way Forward



**PROPOSED BY:**  
**THE CANADIAN FEDERATION OF STUDENTS**  
**NOVA SCOTIA**

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## Who We Are

The Canadian Federation of Students is Canada's largest and oldest student organization, uniting over 530,000 college, undergraduate and graduate students across the country. The Federation and its predecessor organizations have advocated for the interests of post-secondary students in Canada for more than 90 years. The Federation's ultimate goal is to achieve a universal system of high-quality, public, tuition-free post-secondary education in Canada for domestic and international students. In Nova Scotia we represent students at six universities.



## Education for All

Decreased government funding as a proportion of operating funds in the post-secondary education sector has meant that costs have been increasingly downloaded onto students. In Nova Scotia, domestic undergraduate tuition fees are currently the highest in Canada, at an average of \$9,028 for the 2021-22 academic year, compared to a national average of \$6,693. Accessing an education—increasingly essential to securing a good job and growing the province's economy—has shifted from a public good to a personal investment that is accompanied by life-impacting debt.

Rising tuition fees and the prevalence of loan-based financial assistance have pushed student debt to historic levels. Right now, students in Canada owe \$22.3 billion at the federal level. Student debt creates economic drag and causes students to delay making large purchases and life choices, and actually reverses the positive upward mobility associated with pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Students in Nova Scotia are currently provided some debt relief through the Loan Forgiveness Program. However, the program does not cover students in most graduate or professional programs, or students who complete their degree in more than five years, and provides no coverage if the student does not complete their degree. Considering that students from low-income families are the most likely to take longer to complete their degree, or to not complete it at all, the Loan Forgiveness Program fails to provide support to those students who need it most.

A loans-based financial assistance program penalizes students who are unable to cover the high upfront cost of education. Due to the accrual of interest on student loans, those who require financial assistance end up paying more for their education than individuals who can afford the cost of their education up-front.

With post-secondary education now required for 70% of all new jobs, it is time for Nova Scotia to invest in making our universities and colleges universally accessible. Lowering the cost of post-secondary education will persuade more young people to study in Nova Scotia and moving toward a grants-based assistance program will help ensure more students stay to live and work in the province after graduation.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, "Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study." 2021

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Federation of Students, "Student Debt in Canada: Education Shouldn't be a Debt Sentence." 2013

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Occupation Projection System (COPS), "Imbalances Between Labour Demand and Supply (2017-2026)." October 2017

## Recommendations

1. To ensure post-secondary education is accessible to all, government should pass legislation to mandate the immediate reduction of tuition fees by 10% and the progressive elimination of tuition and user fees for all university and college students in the province by engaging with the federal government to create a 50/50 cost-sharing model for post-secondary education.
2. To ensure universities can keep pace with ongoing operating expense increases and yearly inflation, increase universities' annual operating grants.
3. Convert all student loans to grants and reallocate the funds from the loan forgiveness program to offset costs.
4. Invest in the infrastructure and development of regional Open Educational Resources to increase access to resources for students, help students save money, and allow faculty to have flexible, engaging, and current materials for their courses.

- To ensure accountability and transparency in our publicly funded institutions, amend
5. legislation governing universities to standardise public access to university board of governors meetings in Nova Scotia, and require boards to have public-facing websites that are informative, open, and transparent.

## Fairness for International Students

International students bring so much to our communities and campuses, yet our current post-secondary education system relies on exploiting these students for exorbitant fees to keep our universities financially viable. Despite living, working, and studying in Nova Scotia, international students do not benefit from the same financial supports or basic services available to other Nova Scotians.

Universities in Nova Scotia cite increased international student enrollment as a priority, but the motivation behind this trend is troubling. After facing years of cuts to public funding for universities and colleges, institutions are turning to deregulated international student tuition fees as an alternative source of funding. This trend means that, in Nova Scotia, international students pay on average over double the rate of domestic tuition fees for the same education.

In addition to massive differential fees, international students face barriers in accessing basic services. International students are not eligible for Medical Services Insurance until 13 months after their arrival to Nova Scotia, during which time they cannot leave the province for more than 31 days without resetting their wait for coverage. This means international students are forced to purchase expensive private health care coverage. Over the past two years, international students have also been excluded from most Covid-relief measures and have faced challenges accessing Covid testing, vaccines, and proof of vaccination.

## Recommendations

1. Eliminate differential fees for international students.
2. Commit to regulating international student fees under the next MOU.
3. Provide immediate Medical Services Insurance (MSI) upon arrival for students as well as migrant workers to ensure they have access to critical medical care and public health resources.
4. Provide increased financial support to ensure international students at all Nova Scotia universities have access to international student advisors.

## Support for Indigenous Learners

In Nova Scotia, we work and study on unceded, unsurrendered Mi'kmaq territory that is covered under the Treaties of Peace and Friendship, which Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) People first signed with the British Crown in 1725. In addition to upholding treaty agreements, the provincial and federal governments have a responsibility to fulfill the 94 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action.

The failure of the Canadian federal government to fulfill its responsibility to ensure Indigenous peoples' access to education has left a startling gap in quality of life between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Educational attainment levels among Indigenous people remain significantly lower than the non-Indigenous population. Post-secondary institutions and provincial governments also have a critical role to play to address this reality. Currently, Indigenous learners not only have trouble accessing post-secondary education due to the high cost of tuition fees, but also lack culturally-specific resources and support on campus. In addition, too often syllabi omit history, culture, and languages. Several TRC Calls to Action pertain to these issues in post-secondary institutions and to Indigenous peoples' right to education and the necessity for language revitalization efforts. Post-secondary institutions must take action, and the provincial government has a role to play to make this a reality.

## Recommendations

1. Increase funding for bursaries for Indigenous students.
2. Increase funding for Mi'kmaw language resources and courses to help fulfill TRC Call to Action Number 16: "We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages".

3. Increase funding for land-based programming.
4. Increase funding for hiring Indigenous faculty to create more teaching capacity.
5. Implement data collection to track Indigenous student enrollment, Indigenous faculty hiring, and success rates of both.
6. Hire a Liaison Officer between universities and Mi'kmaw communities.

## Wages & Cost of Living

Housing is a human right and reliable internet has become a necessity for school and work, but high housing and internet costs and low wages are making affording education increasingly out of reach. Nova Scotia's minimum wage is currently \$12.95 (increasing to \$13.35 on April 1, 2022), while the living wage for Halifax is calculated to be \$21.80, and for Cape Breton Regional Municipality it is \$17.65. The average price of a two-bedroom apartment in Halifax has increased 43% in the last five years while minimum wage has only gone up 15%. At-home internet access has become essential for school and work during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a further financial burden for students. And for those living in rural areas, high-speed internet is often unreliable, as people in rural areas deal with download speeds 10 times slower than those in urban areas.

We are living through a pandemic that has underlined systemic injustices in our society and highlighted that it is essential to support people by providing strong social services and education. We need to immediately invest in measures to support students with action that will benefit our communities long term.

## Recommendations

1. Pass legislation for permanent rent control.
2. Work with internet providers to offer a low-cost internet package for students. Commit to investigating the development of public infrastructure to provide high quality, uncapped access to the internet for all Nova Scotians.
3. Raise the minimum wage to \$20/hour to ensure every Nova Scotian can afford all necessities.

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Nova Scotia, "Living Wages in Nova Scotia 2021." 2021

<sup>5</sup> Rentals.ca, "January 2021 Rent Report." 2021

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), 2021

## Climate Justice

The climate crisis is a serious threat to current and future generations. Post-secondary education has an important role to play in a just transition to a sustainable economy.

The International Energy Agency released a report last year which stated clearly that no new coal, oil, or gas exploration or developments can be pursued from 2021 onward if we are to decarbonize our global economy by 2050 - which we must do to avoid the catastrophic effects of allowing global warming to increase past 1.5 degrees Celsius. In 2017, Nova Scotia relied on coal for about 55% of its annual electricity needs and still has the dirtiest electricity grid in Canada. Moving Nova Scotia's electricity supply to 90% renewable energy by 2030 would create more than 35,000 new jobs in Nova Scotia.

88% of current oilpatch workers say they would make a career change in the next year if the necessary government supports were in place. Supporting students and workers in a just transition to a sustainable economy requires a commitment to tuition-free college and university programs for students re-training from the fossil fuel sector and for students training in essential and low-carbon sectors including renewable energy, ecosystem rehabilitation, and health care.



## Recommendations

1. Commit to bolder climate targets to ensure Nova Scotia and Canada do our fair share to cut carbon emissions.
2. Commit to ending new fossil fuel development, including placing a moratorium on offshore drilling.
3. Address environmental racism by ensuring Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities are involved in creating and implementing environmental legislation.
4. Create a just transition plan for students and workers in high carbon industries which includes free education for job retraining.

<sup>7</sup> International Energy Agency, "Net Zero by 2050." 2021

<sup>8</sup> Ecology Action Centre, "Green Jobs Report." 2019

<sup>9</sup> Iron and Earth, "The Prosperous Transition Plan." 2021



## Health Care & Mental Health Services

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the pre-existing gaps in Nova Scotia's health care system and the critical lack of adequate mental health services in the province. Students, facing increasing financial instability due to rising tuition and living costs, are struggling to pay for medications and treatments not covered by their student union's health care plan. Rising mental health concerns have also become increasingly common, especially among students and youth in Canada, with people aged 15 to 24 reporting the greatest decline in mental health at a 20% reduction from 2019 to mid 2020.

Part of tackling the health care crisis in Nova Scotia means addressing the reasons people get sick in the first place. Social and economic factors like poverty, housing and food insecurity, and systemic forms of oppression like racism and colonialism greatly increase people's likelihood of getting sick or facing mental health or addictions problems.

Public health is best supported by public health care. For-profit, private health care takes public funds and turns them into private profits. We need a health care system and mental health services that ensure everyone is able to get the care they need without facing months-long waitlists or worrying about how they will pay for their treatment. This means investing in the education of health care professionals and in the jobs of health care workers to end the current reality of Nova Scotian students having to look for work in other provinces in order to pay off their student debt.

### Recommendations

1. Invest in public health care and mental health care systems, including eliminating tuition from care profession programs and paying health care workers adequate wages.
2. Ensure all forms of health care and mental health services are universal and free.
3. Provide evidence-based harm reduction and addictions care.
4. Address the causes of illness, mental illness, and addiction by investing in social and economic supports.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics Canada, "The Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19: A Six-Month Update: Impacts on Youth." 2020