

ALLIANCE OF BC  
STUDENTS

**STUDENTS  
FOR A  
BRIGHTER  
BRITISH  
COLUMBIA**

Representing 80,000 undergraduate,  
graduate, and trades students.

# STUDENTS ARE AMONGST THE HARDEST HIT BY THE PANDEMIC



The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on people throughout BC. Students have been particularly affected, and face unique challenges due to their student status. Students are more likely to work in accommodation and service industries, meaning they were much more likely to be affected by job losses and layoffs at the beginning of the pandemic (1). In early March 2020, the employment rate of students aged 20-24 was 52.5%, which dropped to 29.8% in April (1).

In early March 2020, approximately 60% of students had employment plans or secure prospects for the summer term, with an additional 26% intending to work but without firm plans (1). However, of the students who had planned to continue working their current jobs in early March, 21% lost their job and 34% more were laid off two months later (1). Less than a quarter of all students were able to work the same number of hours as before the pandemic (1).

While programs such as the federal Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) did help to address the immediate financial concerns of some students, this funding was \$750 a month less than that provided through the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Students who had planned to work during the summer but who lost their employment opportunities were only able to access CESB, and 61% of students remained very or extremely concerned about their financial wellbeing after the program began (1). Only 41% of students reported being eligible for CESB, and 61% reported that government financial aid was not enough to help them through the next academic year (2). Students are currently taking on enormous challenges by continuing their education, but need support to continue doing so. Knowing that post-secondary education will play such a key role in economic recovery, the ABCS believes the following recommendations will be critical to rebuilding a brighter province for us all.

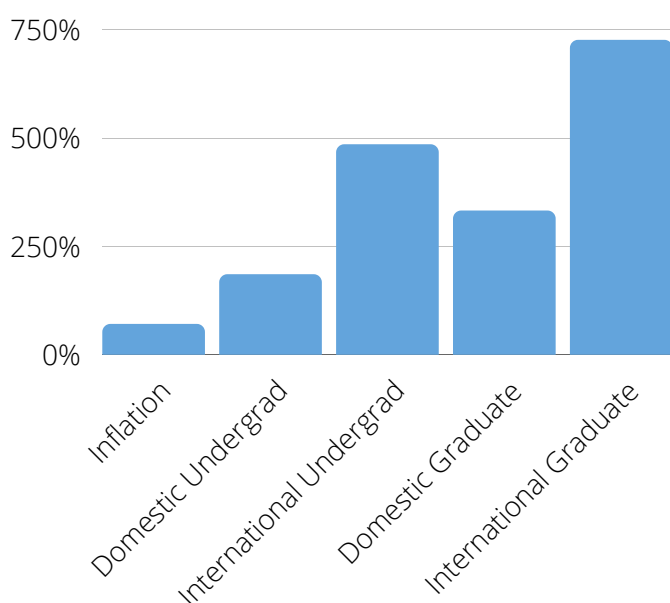
# INVESTING IN EDUCATION

An accessible post-secondary system is essential for the development and growth of a sustainable and advanced economy. However, for many, the costs of post-secondary education remain prohibitive due to high education and living costs. Tuition has risen consistently in BC, posing a major barrier to individuals who wish to better themselves and their communities through education. Currently, BC's post-secondary institutions receive 33.63% of their funding from the province, 33.36% from tuition and other fees, 24.66% of their funding from other sources, and 9.35% from the federal government (3). Within BC, provincial spending on higher education decreased by 8% between 2011 and 2017 (4). In other provinces, however, provincial spending on higher

education has increased by at least 25% over the past 10 years (3).

As provincial investment has decreased, institutions have been enthusiastically recruiting international students and raising tuition at significant and oftentimes unpredictable rates in order to build and maintain their operating budgets (10). In 2018, international students contributed \$3,988,723 to the provincial GDP, creating 45,164 jobs with \$2,454,329 in income revenue (11). International students are a key part of the BC post-secondary landscape, and deserve predictability in their educational costs. Reliance on international student tuition revenue puts BC institutions in a precarious financial position and places an undue burden on international students.

Rate of Inflation in Canada compared to rates of increase in BC tuition (1991-2018) (5, 6, 7, 8, 9).



*The Alliance of BC Students recommends that the Province of British Columbia*

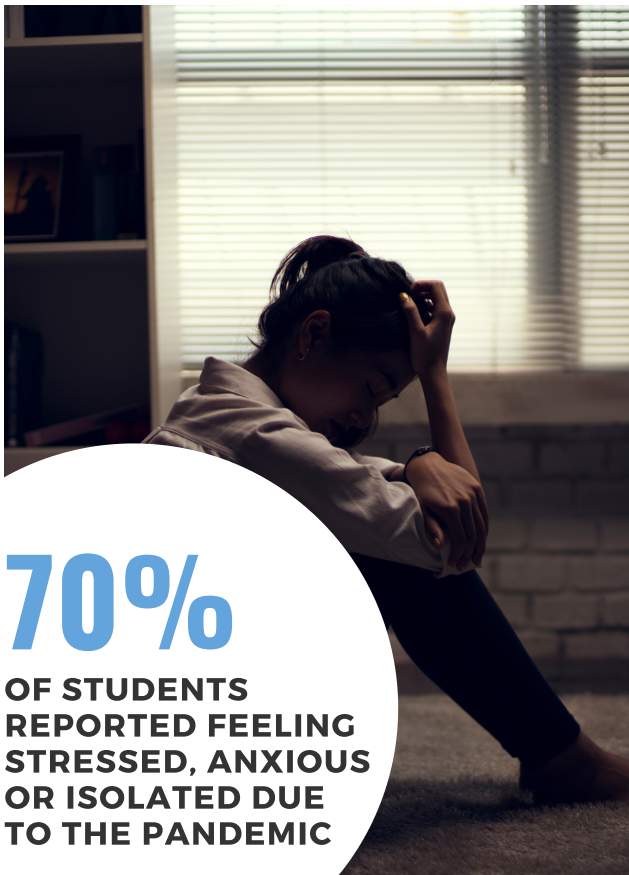
- *Conduct a funding review of provincial post-secondary institutions' operating grants, ensuring that students, faculty, and staff associations are fully integrated throughout the review process; and*
- *Develop an International Education Strategy that ensures that international students' cost of education is predictable, and reduces institutions' reliance on international student tuition.*

# MENTAL HEALTH

Financial strain, job loss, health concerns, and isolation have all had significant mental health impacts on British Columbians. This has only compounded the ongoing mental health conditions that students were facing pre-pandemic. In 2019, students reported that within the last twelve months: 63.6% felt hopeless, 51.6% felt so depressed it was difficult to function, and 68.9% felt overwhelming anxiety (12). Female respondents were more likely to report mental health concerns than male respondents (12). Since the pandemic began, these challenges have been heightened significantly. In June, 70% of students reported feeling stressed, anxious, or isolated

due to the pandemic (2), and 82% reported feeling worried about their futures following the pandemic, from health, to employment, to personal finances (2). Members of equity-seeking communities are experiencing even higher rates of mental distress than the national average.

The Province introduced the Here2Talk 24/7 mental health service for BC post-secondary students in April 2020, which offers vital crisis and referral services (13). However, given the degree of mental distress that students are experiencing, the ABCS would like to see these services expanded to provide ongoing care. The BC NDP committed to expanding access to counselling services by investing in e-health and other technologies during the 2020 provincial election (14), which the ABCS believes should be further extended to students.



*The Alliance of BC Students recommends that the Province of British Columbia ensure that students are able to access free- to low-cost, multi-session counselling through new investments in e-health and other remote technologies, either through investments in the existing Here2Talk service, or through newly developed programs.*



# GRADUATE STUDENTS

Graduate students, in their role as researchers and teaching assistants, directly support the academic and research mission of BC universities. Despite their critical role, support for graduate students has been lacking. Graduate students are distinct from undergraduates in key ways: a significant portion of graduate students engage in research, they are older than undergraduates (15), and they carry a greater burden of student debt (16). In order to address the unique experiences of graduate students, it is recommended that dedicated funding options for graduate students be established permanently in the province.

The BC Graduate Scholarship Fund, introduced by the BC government in 2018, has supplied merit-based funding to 800 talented students

across the province to pursue their research in BC. However, unless extended, the fund is due to expire in 2021. The ABCS would like to see the program become permanent and have it expanded to include students in non-STEM disciplines.

There are currently no needs-based grants for graduate education in BC. Allowing graduate students to apply for funding under the newly created BC Access Grant will improve access to education for those who face financial barriers to graduate studies. Graduate students contribute immensely to advancing and developing the next stage of our economy, both in their time as students and beyond. Graduate students are the key drivers of the research and innovation sector in the province, and will be essential in supporting BC's economic recovery.



*The Alliance of BC Students recommends that the Province of British Columbia:*

- *Permanently establish the BC Graduate Scholarship fund, and expand the eligibility criteria to include students in non-STEM disciplines at a total annual cost of \$8 million; and*
- *Expand the eligibility criteria for the BC Access Grant to include graduate students.*

# STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Access to advanced education is essential to rebuilding BC's economy, and it must be ensured that no British Columbians are left behind as the province moves forward. Persons with disabilities are less likely to be employed, with 49% of Canadians with a disability aged 25 to 64 being employed, compared to 79% of those without a disability (17). People with a disability who had post-secondary credentials are more likely to be employed than those with a high school diploma or who did not graduate high school (18). Despite the importance of post-secondary education for employment outcomes, students with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing post-

secondary education. Many students with disabilities face significant disruptions to their education due to financial, health, and accessibility constraints. Students with disabilities often take on exceptional additional costs, both directly and indirectly related to their education. Some students have to pay for accessibility services and equipment, such as e-readers, tutors or translators, while others may have to pay for mobility devices, receiving a formal diagnosis, or medication.

Statistics Canada has stated that the labour potential of persons with disabilities is massively under-utilized. Nearly 645,000 unemployed persons with disabilities are unable to find work due to a lack of accessible and inclusive work environments (18). This can be addressed, but additional research must be conducted to move towards building solutions to this problem (18). While there is data available on the experiences of students with disabilities available on the national level, the experiences and needs of students with disabilities within BC are not well known.



*The Alliance of BC Students recommends that the Province of British Columbia conduct a province-wide survey on the experiences of students with disabilities in post-secondary education.*

# SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

Sexualized violence can have devastating impacts on the emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing of those affected by it, and is correlated with increased rates of mental illness and distress (19). For students who have experienced sexualized violence, it can have significant impacts on their academics and ability to continue their education (19). While fewer students are currently on campus, sexualized violence continues to take place. Rates of domestic violence have risen significantly since social distancing measures were first put in place in BC in March (20). Social distancing and quarantine orders limit opportunities for those experiencing domestic violence to access support, leaving many people trapped with their abusers (21).

Most sexualized violence prevention and response education is designed to be delivered in-person, and smaller institutions do not have the capacity to develop these programs themselves. The BC government invested \$760,000 in June 2019 to initiate several projects intended to support campus sexualized violence prevention and response efforts. However, it has not been guaranteed that this funding will be renewed.

Every student has a right to an educational environment free from sexualized violence. However, sexualized violence is perpetrated at incredibly high rates, with one in ten women in post-secondary education reporting having been sexually assaulted in the past twelve months (22). While institutions are required to have a policy under the Sexual Violence and Misconduct Policy Act (Act 23), the legislation provides few minimum requirements, leading to many policies to contain practices that cause further harm to survivors. Students for Consent Culture Canada (SFCC) has developed 11 requirements for sexualized violence policies to incorporate in order to meet the minimum standard of care necessary (Appendix A).

*The Alliance of BC Students recommends that the Province of British Columbia:*

- *Renew the \$760 000 to address campus sexualized violence on an annual basis; and*
- *Adopt into regulation the 11 minimum standards identified by Students For Consent Culture under the Sexual Violence and Misconduct Policy Act.*

# APPENDIX A: 11 MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE POLICIES

## 1. A DEFINED STANDALONE SEXUAL VIOLENCE POLICY

The existence of a stand-alone sexualized violence policy that does not place the process through the Student Code of Conduct. A policy is stand-alone if it is a separate document from other policies and has its own set of procedures that do not refer to the procedures of other policies.

## 2. THE RIGHT TO BOTH CRIMINAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES

The ability to report experiences to both their institution and the police without risk of having a complaint suspended due to the other process.

## 3. MANDATORY SEXUAL VIOLENCE TRAINING FOR DECISION-MAKERS

A mandate of quality and expert-informed sexualized violence sensitivity training on trauma-informed approaches for those involved in hearing the sexualized violence complaint and deciding the outcomes.

## 4. RAPE SHIELD PROTECTIONS

Whereby a complainant cannot be asked questions about their sexual history at any point of the informal or formal complaint process.

## 5. PROTECTIONS FROM FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTERS

A complainant should not be required to be present at the same time as a respondent. Similar to the criminal justice, the interests between survivor protections and procedural fairness can be balanced through the use of a screen and/or video technology.

## 6. TIMELINES

Clearly defined and reasonable timelines for a complaint process that do not exceed 45 days for a complaint process and 48 hours for immediate accommodations.

## 7. PROTECTIONS FROM GAG ORDERS

Protections from institutions imposing a gag order on complainants through a broadly defined confidentiality requirement.

## 8. BROADER SCOPE

Campus sexualized violence policies must explicitly create a procedure for students to report sexualized violence while participating in a work placement, internship, or co-op.

## 9. INFORMING OF SANCTIONS

A mandate that institutions must inform both the complainant and respondent of all sanctions ordered by the review committee. This includes making appropriate adjustments to provincial privacy and labour law.



## 10. STUDENT REPRESENTATION ON COMMITTEES

A mandate for the creation of a Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Taskforce, with meaningful student representation of at least 30% at each institution.

## 11. A REVIEW PROCESS OF EVERY TWO (2) YEARS

While Act 23 currently requires institutions to review their policies every three years, our knowledge of best practices for these policies are constantly improving, changing almost completely every four years.

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