

Policy Positions

A complete compendium for members,
partners, and policy makers

2020-2021



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Canadian Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (CASFAA) Policy Positions for 2020/21

CASFAA applauds the Federal initiatives implemented in spring 2020 to address the economic difficulties imposed on students due to the COVID 19 Pandemic. Loss of summer employment reduced part-time employment coupled with increased costs of post-secondary education have affected students from all backgrounds and levels of schooling. As some post-secondary institutions transition to online learning new challenges have arisen. Moving forward. Substantial challenges remain for post-secondary education students who rely on student financial assistance to access and persist in their studies:

1. The continued **gap between student need and the availability of government student assistance**, which is commonly referred to as 'unmet need', especially for under-represented groups. The pandemic has shown that financial disparities make a significant impact on students' access and retention.
2. The **complex nature of the current student aid delivery infrastructure**, which places undue risk on loan recipients.
3. Inconsistent access to **financial literacy education** that may hinder academic, career pursuits and repayment.

CASFAA believes that the following recommendations will improve student success, access and experience with the Canada Student Loan Program, ensuring that Canadians have the opportunity for national prosperity by completing post-secondary education. The summary below is followed by detailed explanations.

Recommendations for Student Success:

- Retain the COVID measures implemented in program year 2020/21 through program year 2021/22
- Increase the CSLP computer allowance and remove it from the book and supply maximums in the need assessment
- Implement mandatory entrance counseling for students who acquire loans through CSLP before their first disbursement.
- Increase the student loan lifetime maximum for PhD students with disabilities.
- Simplify the appeal process for additional disability-related costs.

Recommendations for Student Accessibility:

- Exempt institutional merit-based scholarships and need-based bursaries from the Canada Student Loans Program assessment.
- Review policies to ensure experiential learning opportunities are available to those who rely on the CSLP program.
- Recognition of dependents up to age 18.
- CSLP undertake a holistic review of the Part-Time program.
- Develop a Canada student grant program for Indigenous Students within the CSLP Program.
- Establish harmonious residency requirements across the country, as well as create a direct pathway for student to apply to CSLP directly for federal funding when their residency is in dispute, to ensure their rights as a Canadian are not infringed upon.

Recommendations for Enhancing the Student Experience

- Ensure CASFAA's continued involvement in the implementation, maintenance, and evolution of the new NSLSC portal.
- Ensure a single portal provides critical and holistic information regarding lenders, amounts, and status of all federal and provincial government student assistance awarded.

Student Success

Impact of COVID 19 pandemic

In March 2020 the Federal government introduced changes to the CSLP program in recognition of the challenges placed on students and their families. The elimination of student and spousal contributions has assisted families who have found themselves struggling financially due to the impact of COVID 19. The doubling of Federal grants as well as the weekly increase of CSL funding from \$210/wk to \$350/wk assisted students who were unable to gain or continue employment.

The pandemic also impacted student's mode of post-secondary delivery from in person to online. Many students needed to purchase computers, wifi, software, online books- costs which are not adequately covered under current CSLP policy.

Recommendation

CSLP retain the COVID measures implemented in program year 2020/21 through program year 2021/22.

Increase the annual computer allowance and assess it as its own unique item in the need assessment instead of including the amount in the book and supply limit.

Embedding Financial Literacy

CASFAA is a proud supporter of the great progress achieved since the appointment of Canada's Financial Literacy Leader and the work of the National Steering Committee. The national strategy for financial literacy is inclusive and relevant to all Canadians. We are very pleased with the thought, effort, research and expertise exhibited in the National Strategy for Financial Literacy – *Count me in, Canada* found at the following site: <http://www.fcac-acfc.gc.ca>. CASFAA's cross-country testing of *Your Financial Toolkit* rendered recommendations to make content more relevant for PSE-aged youth. As a result, the FCAC published separate Trainer Materials specifically for this audience in 2018.

It is also critical for all Canada Student Loan Program student-facing processes to integrate financial literacy guidance throughout the loan life cycle. Complexity of the student loan ecosystem in Canada, given the varying federal and provincial components, puts borrowers at risk without clearly outlined considerations. All too often, we encounter students with significant regrets relating to their loans. They misunderstand the impact of becoming ineligible for loans mid-degree, which could lead to "technical" default or obliged repayment. They consolidate their government loans with other forms of consumer debt, and lose all the protections and benefits linked to student loans, such as continuation of interest-free status while in full-time study and access to repayment assistance programs (RAP).

Lack of information to make sound financial decisions impacts student retention and credit rating. It also impedes a graduate's ability to reach their full potential as a consumer and contributing member of the Canadian economy. Financial literacy efforts directed at PSE-aged youth by the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada, as well as local efforts at educational institutions, will never have sufficient impact without being a mandatory measure within the student loan life cycle. With formal, yet consumable guidance, students can be more secure in the knowledge that student loans need not be an investment they come to regret. Borrower regret impedes financial stability for both individuals and the economy.

With the system transformation currently underway by the National Student Loan Service Centre (NSLSC), CASFAA urges the implementation of mandatory online Entrance and Exit Counselling to be seamlessly embedded within the loan disbursement and repayment interactions. Financial Aid Officers across the country were surveyed in December 2019. An overwhelming 93% felt that counselling activities would benefit CSLP borrowers.

The Spring 2020 "Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Parliament of Canada on Student Financial Assistance" identified a lack of financial education tools for students to assist students in understanding their financial obligations under the Canada Student Loans Program.

Recommendation

All interactions between student borrowers and the National Student Loan Service Centre should be reviewed for financial literacy opportunities. Especially critical is the implementation of mandatory entrance and exit counselling for student who acquire loans through the CSLP as follows:

All first-time borrowers of Canada Student Loans, and borrowers with new loans after a prolonged period of non-borrowing must complete loan entrance counselling before their first loan disbursement. This ensures students have a good understanding of borrower responsibilities as well as the loan terms and conditions.

All borrowers of Canada Student Loans must complete loan exit counseling during their final semester or if they withdraw from school. This ensures a solid understanding of prepayment and repayment options, grace periods, repayment assistance programs, etc. An explanation of contacting loan service providers and the consequences of default are also imperative.

Lifetime Assistance Limits for Students with Permanent Disabilities

Budget 2019 introduced a number of measures making Canada Student Loans more accessible to students with permanent disabilities. Increasing the cap of the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment to \$20,000 per year was the first increase in more than a decade. Budget 2019 also addressed student loan debt for students with permanent disabilities by expanding the eligibility for the Severe Permanent Disability Benefit so that more student borrowers can qualify for loan forgiveness. Restrictions for borrowers using the Repayment Assistance Plan for Borrowers with Permanent Disabilities were also addressed therefore allowing borrowers to receive further loans and grants.

While the changes announced in Budget 2019 will assist students with disabilities there are still other areas in need of consideration. Students are no longer eligible for financial assistance once they complete a student period exceeding the prescribed number of weeks. The current limit is 340 weeks for Undergraduate and Masters Degrees, and 400 weeks for PhD candidates. Students with recognized permanent disabilities have a lifetime limit of 520 weeks, and while this is a fairly significant time extension for undergraduate and masters students, it provides only a disproportionate two additional years of studies for a PhD student with disabilities. In all cases, appeals for disability-related additional costs and study extensions are possible, but require an annual (and manual) process. Graduate students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable because they tend to access the Disability Office or Graduate Studies within their Educational Institutions for overall support rather than CSLP experts in the Financial Aid Offices.

Recommendation

Increase the student loan lifetime maximum for PhD students with permanent disabilities and simplify the appeal process for additional disability-related costs. This will support students in creating a sound financial plan for the duration of their studies and advance persistence to successful degree completion to an already vulnerable sub-set of students.

Student Accessibility

Institutional Needs-Based Awards

Educational Institutions often participate in helping students address financial need (after considering maximum government aid and other resources) in the form of merit-based scholarships and need-based bursaries. The implementation of the fixed student contribution need assessment addressed parental contribution and student contribution by implementing a cap on the contribution amount. Student part time earnings during the study period are no longer assessed against the student but are recognized as a supplement to CSLP funding. While these changes were a positive impact for students CSLP considers all merit and need-based awards over and above \$1,800.00 as student resources. This creates a disincentive for schools to invest more in financial assistance, as exceeding this threshold means their funds may replace rather than supplement government aid.

Recommendation

CASFAA urges the government to exempt institutional merit-based scholarships and need-based bursaries from the Canada Student Loans Program assessment so that students with need can be supported through educational institutions' own supplemental access programs.

Experiential Learning Opportunities Outside the Classroom

High quality mobility and work experiences contribute to successful student transition to the workforce. Educational Institutions are striving to expand opportunities for students to participate in these enriched educational opportunities. Recent federal announcements regarding student work experience, in particular co-ops, have increased opportunities for students to gain valuable experience. Current CSLP policies on experiential learning prevent many students from accessing funds while participating in these opportunities and/or prevent entire programs from being eligible for student loan funding.

Recommendation

Review policies to ensure experiential learning opportunities are available to those who rely on the CSLP program.

Students with Dependents

Additional costs for dependent children was limited to children aged 12 and under only. This is particularly a hardship for parents returning to school later in life to improve their career prospects and their family's quality of life. Prior to 2014/15, the needs assessment formula calculated funding for dependent children up to the age of 18.

Recommendation

CASFAA recommends that this policy change be reversed. The costs associated with caring for dependent children do not cease to exist at the age of 12.

Part-time Students and Programs

The student pathway through post-secondary continues to evolve. Many student no longer study a path of full-time or part-time instead choosing weaving between the two.

In addition, PSE delivery has changed over the years in an attempt to accommodate new student demographics (e.g. mature learners) and create more flexibility in student access. Non-traditional delivery has rendered some students unable to access loan funding. Scenarios include part-time only programs as well as some programs structured whereby certain semesters are not considered a full-time course load. Research undertaken by SRDC on behalf of the BC and Ontario government in the report "Assessing Impact of Student Financial Assistance Eligibility on Targeted Part time Programs at Public PSEs" (2017) supports the need for policy change.

Recommendation

CASFAA encourages CSLP to undertake a holistic review of the Part-time program including funding model and limits as well as program eligibility.

Indigenous Student Financial Assistance

CASFAA recognizes that First Nations and Inuit students are supported through Indigenous Services, Canada's Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). However, there is ample literature and evidence of waitlists which indicate that PSSP does not provide eligible students with equitable access to PSE funding. The Assembly of First Nations has determined the Program outcomes do not "adequately support access, retention and successful completion." At their recently held annual meeting, it was concluded that funding rates need to provide enough resources to fund all categories of expenditures: tuition, living allowance, books, and travel.

The Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) is an option to supplement PSSP funding but has too few measures which specifically encourage Indigenous learners. CASFAA acknowledges the recent improvements to CSLP, with the introduction of Fixed Student Contribution exempting Indigenous learners and their band funding, as a good first step. Yet concerns related to successful completion of PSE and, later, employment are seen as deterrents to obtaining a student loan (EKOS Research Associates Inc 2005b). Barriers such as past credit history, unfamiliarity with or distrust of student loan systems also affect the ability to obtain student loans.

Providing educational support via non-repayable Canada Student Grants would appropriately supplement PSSP band funding based on financial need, and enable Indigenous learners to succeed with their chosen PSE program. These grants should consider the unique costs facing Indigenous

learners, such as remoteness of their community and its distance from location of studies, as well as the need to travel home frequently linked to dependent care. Higher attainment rates and sustainable employment is more easily achieved with multiple additive funding options that are responsive to the distinct characteristics of Indigenous learners.

Supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (specifically numbers 7, 10i, and 10ii) there needs to be a commitment to raising the educational attainment rates of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people to national averages. For Canada, the Indigenous population represents a growing segment of the country's labour force and a key part of its future social development and economic prosperity.

Recommendation

Develop a Canada Student Grant Program tailored to Indigenous students, with unique expenses, such as relocation and community visits, included in the cost of attendance for need assessment. This Grant will help to provide additional non-repayable financial support to address access, retention and successful completion of Indigenous students in post-secondary studies and reduce the educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

Enhancing the student experience

Residency Requirement

Global movement of students and immigration has resulted in some students facing challenges in establishing residency for student aid funding. These students can face long delays while a decision is being made between jurisdictions, sometimes not being resolved. Residency requirement policy and interpretation vary across jurisdictions. This lack of consistency results in students being left in a funding limbo.

Recommendation

Establish harmonious residency requirements across the country, as well as create a direct pathway for student to apply to CSLP directly for federal funding when their residency is in dispute, to ensure their rights as a Canadian are not infringed upon.

Student Loan Portal

Over the past decade, the Canada Student Loan and provincial loan programs have undergone major policy shifts, resulting in many students holding multiple types of loans with different lenders. In addition to loans from the previous guaranteed and risk-shared programs held at one or more banking institutions, students may also have direct loans and harmonized loans at the National Student Loans Service Centre, and provincial loans with various direct lenders or banking institutions.

This complex history of loans is often very confusing, and students and financial aid staff at post-secondary institutions have difficulty accessing information about total debt load with each lender, especially when students transfer between educational institutions and provincial/ territorial residency.

Students with multiple types of loans often go into technical default with one or more lenders when these lenders have not been informed about their full-time student status, resulting in unnecessary interest charges and endangering future funding.

CASFAA is grateful for the advisory opportunity provided by CSLP and D+H in the development of the new NSLSC portal.

Recommendation

Ensure CASFAA's continued involvement in the implementation, maintenance and evolution of the new NCLSC portal.

Recommendation

Ensure a single portal provides critical and holistic information regarding lenders, amounts and status of all government student assistance awarded.

On behalf of the CASFAA Board and our members representing PSE institutions from every region across the country, we thank you in advance for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



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