



# CREATING EQUITABLE AND ACCESSIBLE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

BCFS | UBC AMS | SFSS

# COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS

## University of British Columbia Alma Mater Society

The Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia - Vancouver (AMS) represents over 54,000 undergraduate and graduate students and is incorporated under BC's Societies Act. In our efforts to improve the quality of students' educational, social, and personal lives, we advocate for affordable and accessible post-secondary education in BC.

## Simon Fraser Student Society

The Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) is a student-led organization that represents and advocates for the interests of the 25,000+ undergraduate students at SFU. We are a not-for-profit support network and voice at SFU that exists to improve the health and wellbeing, academic conditions, social experience, and financial conditions of our members.

## British Columbia Federation of Students

The British Columbia Federation of Students (BCFS) represents over 170,000 college and university students from across all regions of the province. The Federation represents full- and part-time students at the college, undergraduate, and graduate levels. Together these students advocate for a well-funded system of post-secondary education in BC that is affordable and accessible for all students. The Federation's membership is comprised of:

University of British Columbia Students' Union Okanagan  
Camosun College Student Society  
Coast Mountain Students' Union  
Douglas Students' Union  
Emily Carr Students' Union  
College of New Caledonia Students' Union  
University of Northern British Columbia Graduate Students' Society  
North Island Students' Union  
Okanagan College Students' Union  
Quest University Students' Association (prospective members)  
Selkirk College Students' Union  
Thompson Rivers University Students' Union  
Students' Union of Vancouver Community College  
Vancouver Island University Students' Union

The current government of BC has made important commitments to support the public services that improve the lives of all British Columbians. From eliminating interest on student loans to dedicating resources to address sexualised violence on campuses, to funding for the creation and adaptation of open education resources, the impact of this work has been felt by all students across the province. We are excited to see a government whose vision seeks to make life in BC more affordable, to deliver services that people count on, and to build a strong, sustainable and innovative economy for everyone. Making post-secondary education affordable and accessible to all falls directly in line with these objectives.

Several immediate steps can be taken by the province to achieve that goal, including:

- restructuring BC's student financial assistance system;
- regulating fees for international students and creating a provincial strategy for international education; and
- providing funding to strengthen universities' and colleges' capacity to address sexual violence on campus.

## STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

BC is the only province that offers neither up-front grants, nor forgivable loans. Instead, the government offers a series of boutique grants and repayment assistance programs that are available to small pockets of the population. Up-front grants relieve financial pressures that students face during their studies, and enable students to focus more on being successful in their classes, rather than worrying about how to make the next semester's tuition fee payment. Further, the assurance provided by up-front, needs-based grants addresses debt aversion, a factor that limits those from low- and middle-income backgrounds from enrolling in the first place. Recent public opinion polling shows that the public agrees—68% of British Columbians support or strongly support the idea of a needs-based, upfront grant system of financial aid for BC students.

The current government has committed to establishing a \$1,000 completion grant program to provide debt relief to BC graduates; however, this does not take into consideration the reality that the existing completion grants do not effectively reduce the financial burden on students in BC. The funding for this initiative could be better used if directed towards an up-front needs-based grants program, thus reducing overall debt loads for students.

The federal government removed education and textbook tax credits in 2017 and used those funds to increase funding to the Canada Student Grants Program. The BC government can do the same, and use the \$57 million allotted for education tax credits to fund students who otherwise cannot afford post-secondary education. By reallocating the over \$30 million completion grant funds and the \$57 million in tax credits, as well as the reduction in costs of managing these boutique programs, the government would create a base of over \$87 million to go towards a system of up-front needs-based grants which will help BC students who need it the most.

### RECOMMENDATION

That the government increase non-repayable student financial assistance options for students from low- and middle-income backgrounds through the creation of a comprehensive up-front, needs-based grants program.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students come to Canada for an opportunity to access one of the top ranked countries for higher education globally. Yet 16 years of flat or reduced core funding to universities and colleges has resulted in a reliance on ever-increasing fees charged to international students to make up budget shortfalls.

The previous government committed to doubling the number of international students in BC schools as a part of its BC Jobs Plan in 2012, and surpassed this goal in 2017. Arguably, the rationale for this was to infuse British Columbia with a larger pool of educated people from which to fill shortages in workers and grow the economy. However, the government has left the key to attracting potential students completely in the hands of institutions. By having no regulation on the increase in tuition fees for international students, institutions are free to set prices at whatever number they see fit—there is no consistency across the province nor is there predictability in the increases each year.

One of the biggest financial challenges facing international students is the inability to properly budget for a 4-year degree. In any given year, fees may increase by as much as 20%—increases are based on whatever the institution deems required to balance its

budget. This is an unsustainable model that often results in students struggling to stay in BC to finish their studies.

A secondary challenge to the current policy context is that there are no notice requirements for fee increases. Institutions are able to implement substantial fee increases with only a few weeks of notice, leaving students scrambling to gather resources from their home countries. Unlike domestic students, international students who fail to assemble the necessary resources face removal from their courses and programs, and removal from the country. International student fees at universities in BC have risen 594% since 1991, from \$3,991 in 1991 to \$27,705 annually in 2019.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the government amend the Tuition Fee Limit Policy to include regulation of fees for international students to create fairness, consistency, and predictability for international student tuition fees.
2. That the government develop a new BC international education strategy that will provide sufficient support for international students to assist in their cultural, social, and academic integration.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND MISCONDUCT POLICIES

The 2016 passage of Bill 23, the Sexual Violence and Misconduct Act, was critical to acknowledge the prevalence of sexual violence at post-secondary institutions. The enforcement of this legislation is important to ensure that BC's post-secondary institutions have clear reporting processes and the necessary resources to provide support for survivors of sexual violence. However, the policies developed vary greatly from institution to institution and there is much variation in complaint response procedures and in reporting practices—largely as a consequence of available resources.

The implementation of, and education on, these policies is resulting in additional costs to institutions—costs that their already stretched budgets are struggling to accommodate. Of the twenty-five public post-secondary institutions in BC, only five have dedicated offices to provide support for survivors of sexual violence. Recently the government allocated \$760,000 in funding to support best practices and training resources, and to support plain language in policies. This funding is crucial to initiate the implementation of best practices across all campuses; however, further funding from the Ministry is essential to ensure that all institutions can effectively follow their own policies and procedures in addressing sexual violence and misconduct, including providing training and staff supports to ensure all front-line employees are able to help and support survivors who come forward. This is especially important as the government and institutions increase awareness of prevention and responding to sexual violence, which will likely result in more survivors accessing on-campus supports.

The Sexual Violence and Misconduct Act lacks oversight and accountability procedures that, if they existed, would provide a mechanism for appeals or complaints from individuals who believe their safety was compromised or their rights were violated by their institution during the process undertaken per the institution's policy. The absence of meaningful and accessible oversight and accountability mechanisms creates a situation whereby institutions, regardless of intention, may undermine an individual's rights or safety with no recourse for the survivor. The implementation of a process that is codified and referenced in each campus sexual violence policy would allow a survivor of campus sexual violence or misconduct to know what steps they can take if they believe they are in this situation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the government review the sexual violence and misconduct policies at the twenty-five public post-secondary institutions to ensure they use plain language, cover the necessary issues, and provide satisfactory responses.
2. That the government undertake a needs assessment amongst post-secondary institutions to determine the funding necessary to effectively implement sexual violence and misconduct policies.
3. That the government strengthen institutional frameworks and processes by developing an accountability mechanism that is external to institutions to address complaints that may arise regarding institutional implementation of sexual violence and misconduct policies.