



# **Making Post-Secondary Education Affordable for British Columbians**

**SFSS | UBC AMS | BCFS**



# Collaborating Organizations

## **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.

## **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.

## **British Columbia Federation of Students**

The British Columbia Federation of Students (BCFS) represents over 130,000 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  
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 an important commitment to support the public services that improve the lives of all British Columbians. 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;
- promoting open education resources (OERs) through funding and policy; and
- providing funding to strengthen universities' and colleges' capacity to address sexual violence on campus.

## Student Financial Aid

BC does not provide the crucial support that the province's low- and middle- income students and families need to obtain a post-secondary education, which frequently leaves them with significant debt upon graduation. Consequently, students with less financial means end up paying more in interest payments and ultimately spend more for their education than their wealthier classmates who can afford to pay up front. To combat the burden of onerous student loan debt, four provinces have eliminated interest on student loans: Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia. In doing so, they have made post-secondary education more equitable and accessible. It is time for BC to catch up. Recent polling shows that the public agrees: 68% of British Columbians want to see the government follow through on their commitment to eliminate interest on student loans as part of the 2019 budget or sooner.

BC is the only province that does not offer either up-front grants or forgivable loans. Instead, BC offers a series of boutique grants and repayment assistance programs that are available to small pockets of the population. Up-front grants relieve the financial pressure that students face during their studies, enabling students to focus more on being successful in their courses, rather than worrying about how to make the next semester's tuition payment. Further, the assurance provided by up-front, needs-based grants addresses debt aversion, a factor that limits low- and middle-income students from enrolling in the first place. BC should take similar measures to catch up to the rest of Canada.

### Recommendations

Eliminate all interest charged on BC student loans; and 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.

## Open Education Resources

Post-secondary affordability requires a holistic look at the costs of education. The high cost of textbooks has become a serious obstacle to accessing post-secondary education in BC. Textbook prices rose by a staggering 82% between 2002 and 2012, and now typically cost more than \$200 per book. For many students and families who are already struggling to afford tuition fees and the cost of living, this unpredictable expense can be a huge burden. Many end up taking on additional loans or credit card debt or work longer hours just to pay for their books. Others compromise their educational

experience by opting not to buy books at all or taking fewer courses, short-changing their academic goals. A recent study has shown that 54% of students have opted out of purchasing a required textbook, 27% have taken fewer courses, and 17% have dropped a course because of the price tag of a textbook.

Open Education Resources, notably in the form of open textbooks, are high-quality resources that are available in digital formats for free or for a very low cost in print. OERs can ease the burden of expensive textbook costs and be made available in formats that are accessible to people with disabilities and those who do not have reliable access to the Internet. Not only do OERs replace expensive physical textbooks, they also provide an alternative to online access codes, whose prices are mandated by for-profit publishing companies.

The government agency BCcampus is tasked with the creation and implementation of OERs province-wide. An infusion of funding would allow the agency to create and adapt open textbooks and reflect diverse needs of students and educators; develop sustainable systems to maintain OERs; create resources that are usable by all students, including those with physical and/or learning disabilities; and create and adapt ancillary resources to support open textbooks.

### **Recommendation**

Allocate one-time additional funding of \$5 million to BCcampus to facilitate the creation and expansion of open education resources.

## **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.

There are limited statistics available for sexual assaults on campuses, in part due to low levels of reporting. However, a Canadian survey reports that 20% of female post-secondary students, 47% of LGBTQ+ post-secondary students, and 7% of male post-secondary students have been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. Given these figures, these services are vital to protecting the wellbeing of students.

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. 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.

### **Recommendations:**

Review the sexual violence and misconduct policies at the twenty-five public post-secondary institutions to ensure they cover the necessary issues and provide satisfactory responses; and undertake a needs assessment amongst post-secondary institutions to determine the funding necessary to effectively implement sexual violence and misconduct policies.