



ADVOCACY BRIEF PACKAGE 2020

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Undergraduates of Canadian Research-Intensive Universities (UCRU) is a coalition of student associations whose mandate is to advocate for an affordable, inclusive and high-calibre undergraduate university education with opportunities for increased access to undergraduate research. Our coalition began in 2015 to advocate on issues that disproportionately and uniquely affect undergraduates from Canada's U15 universities – which is what sets our strategic advocacy priorities apart from other student advocacy organizations at the federal level.

UCRU acknowledges that our members live, work and study across Canada on the traditional and unceded territory of many Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Dené, Métis, Sioux, Huron-Wendat, Attawandaran, Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Leni-Lunaape and the many distinct Coast Salish peoples.

UCRU is committed to advocating for the needs of Indigenous students and furthering Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation in our communities and beyond.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Student Financial Support

1. Invest \$1.8 billion dollars per year to implement a 2-year grace period on all federal student loans for new graduates.
2. Increase the 2019 Canada Student Grants by \$1200 per student for the 2021 federal budget.

Supporting International Students

3. Make \$20 million dollars available to support Student Work Placement Program opportunities for both international and domestic students.
4. Include international students in the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy.
5. Prioritize international students in Canada's Immigration Levels Plan.

Undergraduate Research Opportunities

6. Invest \$15 million dollars per year to expand the Undergraduate Student Research Awards Program to 3,400 students annually in health, humanities, and social science research.
7. Prioritize projects that fulfill a 'future global challenge' as identified by the SSHRC.

Access for Indigenous Students

8. Further expand funding for the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.

STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT

INCREASE STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ENSURE STUDENTS RECEIVE ADEQUATE TRAINING TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE.

1. Invest \$1.8 billion dollars per year to implement a 2 year grace period on all federal student loans for new graduates.

The long-term implications of COVID-19 will have an enormous impact on students as they enter the workforce. These impacts have already begun to emerge, as a survey completed by Abacus Data found 75% of students say COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on their financial situation beyond this year.

Furthermore, graduating into economic uncertainty can be detrimental for many students' careers, as this leads to initial earning losses of 30-40% after graduation.¹ Implementing a two-year grace period on student loans for all new graduates relieves some financial burden and enables students to gain more financial stability.

According to Statistics Canada, the average student takes on \$28,000 dollars in debt while pursuing an undergraduate degree.²

By extending the National Student Loan Grace Period for new graduates, the government will assist students training for good jobs while taking on less debt, supporting Canadians and stimulating the Canadian economy in response to COVID-19. With less pressure on repaying their student loans, students will be able to reconceptualize their life plans, moving towards home ownership and entering the middle class sooner than was possible before.

Statistics Canada's research highlights that 54% of students graduate with debt, and the average student takes on \$28,000 in debt while pursuing an undergraduate degree.³ Therefore, UCRU urges the Government of Canada to invest in a two-year grace period on all new graduates' federal student loans, which will undoubtedly have a positive impact on 1.4M students in Canada, their families, and the entire Canadian economy.⁴ This investment will reduce students' financial stress, allowing students to engage in the economy, achieve their goals, receive training for new jobs, and join the middle class.

1. National Bureau of Economic Research, 1050 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138; 617-868-3900

2. Statistics Canada, "National Graduates Survey (NGS), student debt from all sources, by province of study and level of study," Government of Canada, July 14, 2020.

3. Ibid.

4. Universities Canada, "Facts and Stats."



Investing in students receiving the training and skills for tomorrow's workforce will help Canada rebuild its economy.

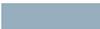


2. Invest \$1 billion to increase the 2019 Canada Student Grants by \$1200 dollars per student for the 2021 federal budget.



This investment was included in the Liberal Party's 2019 election platform and would go a long way to support students through this prolonged economic uncertainty. For most jobs, a degree or diploma has become a prerequisite to entering the workforce in the 21st century, with Universities Canada identifying that 80% of top jobs require a university degree.⁵ However, for many Canadians, financial barriers serve as a significant hurdle to accessing post-secondary education. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in March, the Government of Canada increased grants available to \$6000 dollars for full time students and \$3600 dollars for part time students.

This response was needed, as 29% of all post-secondary students lost all of their



5. Universities Canada, "80% of top jobs require a university degree."

predicted or planned summer income, impacting their ability to pay for school. Though the support for the 2020-2021 academic year is appreciated, the pandemic will have a lasting impact on students' finances, as around half of all students are extremely concerned about taking on more debt because of COVID-19.⁶ Canadian students need continued financial aid to ensure that they can pursue post-secondary education through the coming economic uncertainty.

Ensuring affordable access to post-secondary education can bolster our economy, help train Canadians for future jobs, support young Canadians' financial futures, and build our middle class.

To ensure the long-term success of students in Canada, the government should increase the 2019 Canada Student Grants levels by \$1200 dollars for the 2021 federal budget.



6. Statistics Canada, "COVID-19 Pandemic Financial Impacts on postsecondary students in Canada," Government of Canada, May 15, 2020.

Undergraduates of Canadian Research-Intensive Universities is a coalition of student associations from across Canada. We represent over 250,000 students from ten U15 universities. Learn more at ucru.ca

SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

INVEST IN STUDENTS TO KEEP TOP TALENT IN CANADA AFTER GRADUATION.

3. Make \$20 million dollars available to support Student Work Placement Program opportunities for both international and domestic students.

International students are a vital part of the Canadian economy, contributing \$22 billion dollars annually.⁷ The government's support for co-ops and internships through the Student Work Placement Program is invaluable to facilitating career opportunities for students. However, employers cannot currently access these programs when hiring international students. This can cause an unfair hiring bias towards domestic students which denies international students the same valuable experiences.

On top of training them to enter the workforce in the future, Canadian work experience helps international students prepare to apply for a post-graduation work permit. In order to address Canada's skilled labour shortage, we must work to retain our students after they graduate. International students who receive training in the Canadian workforce will be more likely to remain in Canada after graduation

while contributing to Canada's economy and workforce. To incentivise employers to hire international students, we recommend that the government create a stream of Student Work Placement Program funding which is available for hiring international students and domestic students. We propose a \$20 million dollar investment which would fund positions for up to 7,000 additional domestic and international students to help achieve this goal.

Canada is competing with countries around the world to attract international talent.⁸

Supporting our international students alongside domestic students will create an attractive landscape for these young people. Therefore, UCRU recommends that the government match funding currently available to domestic students by allocating \$20 million in the Student Work Placement Program to be available for both international and domestic Students.

4. Include international students in the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy.

7. Kareem El-Asslam, "642,000 international students: Canada now ranks 3rd globally in foreign student attraction," CIC News, February 20, 2020.

8. Lewington, Jennifer, "Why universities are trying to recruit overseas students from as many places as possible," Macleans, November 4, 2019.



UCRU was excited to hear about the government's investment in employment through the Youth Employment Skills Strategy.

We believe that this support will be invaluable for our students as they seek employment and contribute to the Canadian economy over the next year.

Now, more than ever, employment for our international students is critical for their success in school. International student tuition is typically three to five times higher than domestic tuition. This means that finding employment is even more critical for our international students. In order to support them in finding a job during this difficult time, UCRU recommends that the government support projects targeting international students in the allocation of the Youth Employment Skills Strategy funding.

5. Prioritize international students in Canada's Immigration Levels Plan.

UCRU believes that immigrants are key contributors to Canada's culture and economic prosperity. We are looking forward to welcoming many new immigrants to Canada in the coming years. International students are a critical avenue that Canada can use to bring skilled workers into the Canadian workforce.

After studying in Canada, international students have become acquainted with Canada, gained valuable work experience and often wish to stay here and contribute

to the Canadian economy. However, these students face many barriers to permanent residency. Currently, summer employment and co-op work experiences cannot be counted towards Express Entry pathways despite fulfilling a similar purpose. This concern showcases one of the challenges UCRU identifies with the current Express Entry programs.

COVID-19 has posed specific challenges for international students that will impact their ability to achieve permanent residency after graduation. Rising costs of international tuition, concerns about travelling to pursue their education and a shrinking job market that prioritizes domestic students all make it more difficult for international students to settle in Canada after they are finished their degrees.

In light of COVID-19, we recommend that the government extend post-graduation work permits for all international students by 2 years, allowing for ample time to satisfy permanent residency work experience requirements.

More than 80,000 international students will graduate in Canada this year.⁹ This extension would be critical in allowing international students to gain their required work experience despite the current job market.



9. Statistics Canada, "Postgraduate Students by Institution Type & Status of Student in Canada." 2018.

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

INVEST IN UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN HEALTH, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH.

6. Invest \$15 million per year to expand the Undergraduate Student Research Awards Program to 3,400 students annually in health, humanities, and social science research.

At present, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) strives to support students in their studies while fostering innovation in the natural sciences and engineering.¹⁰ The Council achieves these goals in part through the provision of research scholarships available at every stage of study, from undergraduate to postdoctoral.¹¹ Working in parallel with NSERC, the SSHRC “supports postsecondary-based research and training in the social sciences and humanities,” while the CIHR seeks to train and support health researchers. Despite the similar goals of NSERC and SSHRC, NSERC is the only member to holistically fulfill its mandate through the inclusion of any undergraduate programming, namely

via the provision of Undergraduate Student Research Awards (USRAs).

The USRA is a comprehensive award in the value of \$4,500 plus institutional contribution for undergraduate researchers.

Successful applicants become immersed in high-level research training for 16-weeks, representing a crucial opportunity for work-integrated learning at the undergraduate level.

Across UCRU’s member institutions, undergraduates comprise on average 80% of enrolled students. Yet, those enrolled in the humanities, health and social science programs have few opportunities to receive research training beyond the classroom.

Utilizing the existing USRA infrastructure in use by NSERC, UCRU recommends the government commit \$15 million to extend opportunities to 3,400 undergraduate students in the humanities, social sciences, and health fields. On the microscale, research opportunities - which are generally lacking in the humanities, health and social sciences - improve employability and foster the development of transferable skills in new graduates.

10. Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, “Breakthrough answers to timeless questions,” Government of Canada.

11. Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, “Students and fellows,” Government of Canada.

In fact, leaders across industries hold degrees in the social sciences, health and humanities more often than any other course of study.¹² These leaders are defined by their skills in critical thinking, complex decision-making, and creative exploration, which are all but essential in the age of artificial intelligence.

7. Prioritize projects that fulfill a ‘future global challenge’ as identified by the SSHRC.

An investment in the USRA program - especially if priority is granted to students working on a ‘future global challenge’ project as defined by the SSHRC - would allow the Government of Canada to guide social science, health and humanities undergraduates toward research projects that address issues crucial to our nation’s future, cultivating early and sustained interest among critical areas for investigation.

The most obvious ‘future global challenge’ would be the need to address ‘Global Health and Wellness for the 21st Century.’ Enabling undergraduate students the opportunity to receive hands-on training as part of Canada’s next wave of health researchers which will help Canada address the long-term impacts of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how gaps in the social determinants of health - which include income distribution, early childhood development, food insecurity,

12. British Council, “The Educational Pathways of Leaders, an International Comparison,” Ipsos Public Affairs.

and race - has harmed the health outcomes of far too many in Canada.

As of April 30th 2020, a higher percentage of confirmed positive COVID-19 tests were observed in neighbourhoods with the highest ethnic concentration, greatest material deprivation, and lowest income, as compared to the least marginalized quintiles of each measure. Similarly, groups with the highest percentage of people from racialized communities, newcomers to Canada, those with lower education levels, and higher rates of unemployment, had higher rates of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.¹³ This highlights the need for social science, health and humanities research, as equitable social services like healthcare is as important as ever during COVID-19. These challenges can be addressed by investing in timely and topical research.

Social sciences, health and humanities fields are uniquely suited to engage with socioeconomic gaps and aid the Government of Canada in developing evidence-based policy to solve them.

This work requires robust support from students at all levels of their post-secondary career, beginning with undergraduates. One this is for certain: “choosing to overlook the impact on the social determinants of health is not a prescription for a healthy Canada.”

13. Public Health Ontario, “COVID-19 – What We Know So Far About... Social Determinants of Health,” 2020.

14. Canadian Public Health Association, “What are the social determinants of health?”

ACCESS FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

REDUCE FINANCIAL BARRIERS FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS TO ACCESS POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

8. Further expand funding for the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.

The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) is an integral part of ensuring that Indigenous students can pursue post-secondary education in Canada. The PSSSP provides funding for Indigenous students through their bands and is consistent with the principle of First Nations controlling First Nations education. In 2019, the Federal Government invested \$327.5 million over five years in supporting the PSSSP, marking a great investment in post-secondary education for Indigenous students.¹⁵

Education is a reliable determinant of future job opportunities and income.¹⁶ However, there has historically been a disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations' rates of educational attainment.¹⁷ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission acknowledged this gap through recommendation #7 which is aimed at closing educational and

employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

The disparity in access to education results in negative outcomes for Indigenous students & their communities, our university communities, and for Canada. Engaging more Indigenous people in higher education would create multifaceted positive outcomes for the nearly 1.5 million Indigenous Canadians and kick start economic growth across Canada.¹⁸ This improvement in education would add up to \$7 billion to Canada's gross domestic product.¹⁹ By investing in Indigenous peoples' access to post-secondary education, we are investing in Canada.

An additional investment in the PSSSP is in line with Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendation #11, which calls to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education.²⁰

15. Thea Udawadia, "Federal budget promises over \$900 million for Indigenous students," *The Ubyssy*, March 26, 2019.

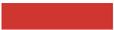
16. Miles Corak, Garth Lipps, and John Zhao, "Family income and participation in postsecondary education," Government of Canada.

17. Government of Canada, "Investing in the Middle Class: Budget 2019," March 19th, 2019, p. 49.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," 2015.



UCRU continues to hear concerns about the backlog of First Nations students seeking post-secondary education that spans generations, with parents unable to receive funding even when their children graduate from high school.

To ensure access for all willing and qualified Indigenous students, the Government of Canada should invest additional money in the Post-Secondary Student Support Program up to the required levels calculated by the Assembly of First Nations to remove financial barriers to Indigenous students accessing post-secondary education. This investment will allow Indigenous students obtain the training and experiences they need to succeed in a changing economy and contribute to stronger economic growth for all Canadians through post-secondary education.



CONTACT

Mackenzzy Metcalfe
UCRU Chair
info@ucru.ca
(519) 661-2111 x82617