

simon fraser
student society

Brief on Canada's COVID-19 Response

June 2020



Members of The Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology,

The Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) is reaching out to provide comments on the Federal government's COVID-19 recovery plan. The SFSS is a student-led non-profit organization that represents and advocates for over 25,000 undergraduate students across the three campuses of Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, Vancouver and Surrey, British Columbia. Our mission is to support students in reaching their full potential by providing resources that represent, connect and benefit our membership. The SFSS works to ensure the financial health, wellbeing, and engagement of our members.

We urge the Federal Government that as you take steps to ensure a long-term recovery from COVID-19, you critically consider the interrelated crises of wealth inequality, racism, and climate change, all stemming from ongoing colonial systems of oppression that we must collectively tackle at its roots. This is our chance to chart a path to a healthier, more equitable future. Do not let this chance to build back better pass us by.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has put everyday people in financial uncertainty while corporations and billionaires get richer¹ at the expense of working-class people. This includes post-secondary students who have been hit particularly hard. From February to March 2020, the number of postsecondary students in the workforce, aged 15-29, decreased by 28%². Students had to adapt to the extenuating circumstances of transitioning to online classes, and losing current and future employment and opportunities which led to financial instability and the inability to afford basic necessities such as food, rent, and their education at no fault of their own. Furthermore, students who have graduated or who are nearing graduation will likely face difficulty in finding employment in their field of study as Deloitte Insights forecast a deep recession which will be more detrimental than the 2008-09 global financial crisis³, reducing the value of students' education over the long term⁴.

¹ "Billionaire Bonanza 2020." Institute for Policy Studies, May 13, 2020. <https://ips-dc.org/billionaire-bonanza-2020/>.

² Canada, Department of Finance. "Support for Students and Recent Graduates Impacted by COVID-19." Canada.ca. Government of Canada, May 11, 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-finance/news/2020/04/support-for-students-and-recent-graduates-impacted-by-covid-19.html>.

³ Alexander, Craig. "Canada." Deloitte Insights, April 15, 2020. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/americas/canada-economic-outlook.html>.

⁴ Agopsowicz, Andrew. "The Recession Roadblock: The Long-Term Career Consequences of Graduating into a Downturn." RBC Thought Leadership, February 13, 2020. <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/the-recession-roadblock-the-long-term-career-consequences-of-graduating-into-a-downturn/>.

Support All Students

We urge the Federal Government to provide immediate and adequate financial relief to all students, including international students. In April 2020, the SFSS administered a COVID-19 survey to all undergraduate students at SFU where we asked a series of questions to better understand how the SFSS can support and advocate for students during this time. The report generated from this survey found that 35.7% of undergraduates' current financial position is preventing them from enrolling in summer semester classes⁵. The delay in enrollment will translate to delay in graduation for students and in doing so, accumulating more debt.

Among students aged 15-24, unemployment in Canada has reached 32%⁶. While we recognize domestic students can now receive the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit, providing them up to \$1,250 per month, and \$2,000 for students with disabilities or dependents, it is barely enough for students to live without making compromises for basic necessities. Additionally, too many students do not have access to federal support during this pandemic. International students are not eligible for this funding, and despite the introduction of the benefit, many students are still experiencing hardships. In 2016, International students' economic activities contributed \$15.5 billion to the Canadian economy and \$2.8 billion in tax revenue which translated to a \$12.8 billion contribution to Canada's GDP and supported 158,300 jobs⁷. It would be a great disservice to the Canadian economy if enrollment numbers of international students dropped significantly due to artificially created barriers. It is an ethical responsibility to enforce a cap on tuition increase for international students to prevent further exploitation during this crisis. We call on the Canadian government to provide immediate adequate financial relief, fund universities directly to help reduce tuition costs for Canadian students and commit to investing in free post-secondary education as part of a Just Recovery.

⁵ "SFSS Recommendations to Support Students During the Pandemic." Simon Fraser Student Society, May 27, 2020. <https://sfss.ca/sfss-recommendations-to-support-students-during-the-pandemic/>.

⁶ Statistics Canada, "COVID-19 and the Labour Market in April 2020," Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, May 8, 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020034-eng.htm>

⁷ Canada, Global Affairs. "Economic Impact of International Education in Canada – 2017 Update." GAC, February 7, 2018. <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2017/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

Commit to a Just Recovery for All

We urge the Canadian government to create your plans based on the Just Recovery principles that have been endorsed by over 400 organizations, including the SFSS⁸, and have the support of thousands of people across the country:

- Put people's health and wellbeing first, no exceptions.
- Strengthen the social safety net and provide relief directly to people.
- Prioritize the needs of workers and communities.
- Build resilience to prevent future crises.
- Build solidarity and equity across communities, generations, and borders.
- Uphold Indigenous rights and work in partnership with Indigenous peoples.

The Canadian response to COVID-19 should be based on these guiding Just Recovery principles as it is important that we do not go back to business as usual. We must centre people and communities over bailouts for corporations. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the interconnected issues of social inequalities, mental health and on-going climate crisis that the current colonial capitalist system perpetuates⁹ and so far has only been addressed with temporary fixes that do not address the issues at its core.

According to our student survey, almost 50% of students reported that they are experiencing mental health issues as a result of COVID-19, with many stating the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and eating disorder as they find themselves isolated and having to abruptly change their daily routines. It is the Federal Government's responsibility to ensure everyone's physical, mental, and financial health across all intersecting levels as we rebuild Canadian society during and post-COVID-19.

Along with many other students across Canada, SFSS calls on the Federal Government to act immediately to address the systemic inequities and blatant racism that disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous people. It is vital that the Canadian government immediately mandates the collection of disaggregated race-based data. Research from various parts of Canada, and the US far more extensively, highlights grave

⁸ "We Demand a Just Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic." Just Recovery for All. Accessed June 19, 2020. <https://justrecoveryforall.ca/endorsers/>.

⁹ Bell, Meghan. "Talk Is Cheap: On Capitalism, Mental Health and Taxing the Rich." The Tyee. The Tyee, January 27, 2020. <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2020/01/27/Talk-Cheap-Capitalism-Bell-Mental-Health/>.

systemic inequities between Black and non-Black people.¹⁰ This national-scale data collection must be led by Black and Indigenous researchers to ensure that the data is being used meaningfully to address systemic racism. Another pressing step the Federal Government must take towards equity is to defund the RCMP and police. Currently, we treat police as if they are trained social and healthcare workers with guns. A system built on colonialism and exploitation cannot be reformed. We urge the federal government to reallocate funds to social services for Black and Indigenous communities that sustainably address root issues of public health and safety.

This moment is undoubtedly a wake-up call for governments and civil societies as to how fragile and unsustainable our colonial systems are. There is no option but for the status quo to be disrupted. Return to “normal” during this crisis only sets us up for another inevitable crisis. This is an opportunity for the Canadian Government to build a resilient future that everyone can fairly be a part of, prioritizing well-being and equitable systemic change with green and sustainable jobs and investing in strong community-based solutions.

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its mission to Canada*, 16 August 2017. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/59c3a5ff4.html>