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**The Canadian Federation of
Students - Ontario is the
oldest and largest student
organization in the province,
representing over 350,000
college, undergraduate and
graduate students from
Thunder Bay to Windsor.**

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EXECUTIVE LETTER

Students in Ontario are tired. Students in the province are disappointed with the lack of support and prioritization from the government at all levels. Students in the province are struggling. After decades of reductions in public funding for Post-Secondary Education and a shifting landscape moving rapidly towards privatization and austerity, students find themselves struggling to keep up with the **ever increasing high tuition fees and the high cost of living**. Students across the province have had enough and continue to demand free and accessible education for ALL in 2024.

Students continue to face unsustainable hikes to tuition fees, consistent scapegoating of International students by all levels of the government, and an alarming increase in xenophobic policies, discrimination, hate crimes and consistent attacks on students rights to organize in the hopes of silencing student voices on our campuses are just some of the challenges students are facing. Administrations and governments continue to **treat our institutions as businesses while scapegoating International students and trying to profit off the backs of students who are struggling to make ends meet**.

As a result, students continue to suffer a steep decline in their mental and physical wellbeing, with racialized, disabled, International, and 2SLGBTQIA+ students being impacted the most. Students are exhausted from the stress of living, working, and studying in the midst of extremely high tuition fees, inflation levels, and support that continues to decline. Students are

tired of having to choose between eating a hot meal, taking transit, and paying for their education amidst consistent announcements of measures to increase tuition; measures that will only further harm students and PSE as a whole. Students are tired of being blamed for the housing crisis while being subjected to exploitative living conditions.

Students through all of this continue to be **in the forefront of change organizing and demanding for free and accessible education**. On November 8th, thousands of students across the province united for the National Day of Action demanding free and accessible education, and we will not stop anytime soon. We demand the immediate reduction and ultimately elimination of all tuition fees for all students while fully committing to increase funding for the Post-Secondary Education system. With an increase in public funding for our public institutions, the implementation of a cap on tuition fees for International students, education justice and a reduction and eventual elimination of all fees for all students, colleges and universities can become more accessible and equitable spaces. The provincial government must act now to make students and develop better policies to support students and increase access to Post-Secondary Education.

Students are constituents and must be made a priority.

Students must be supported by MPPs to achieve these goals. Students must not be left behind to fall through the cracks. The provincial government has the power to alleviate the current pressures on the lives of domestic, International, part-time and full-time, graduate and undergraduate students and create a truly equitable, accessible and high-quality public Post-Secondary Education system.



We, the students, urge the MPPs to make Post-Secondary Education a priority. Robust investments and the commitment to a more just Post-Secondary Education system need to be implemented immediately **to ensure all students can have access to the Post-Secondary Education system** without worrying about the cost of education.

Solidarity,

- **Mitra Yakubi**, Chairperson
- **Adaeze Mbalaja**, National Executive Representative
- **Amrith David**, Treasurer

EDUCATION FOR ALL

RECOMMENDATION:

Reduce tuition fees by 25% annually for the next 4 years, towards the progressive elimination of tuition fees for all.

Ontario's Post-Secondary Education system is in crisis. While the province relies on unsustainable practices such as prohibitive costs, declines in public funding and the exploitation of International students, students in Ontario are left in positions of inaccessibility and instability. Accessing quality education remains a significant concern for many students in the face of high tuition costs, and the dreaded promise of increased student debt. High tuition fees continue to exacerbate existing socioeconomic disparities, limiting educational opportunities for many low income, Black, Indigenous, and racialized students, and students with disabilities who are living in the midst of skyrocketing rent, unlivable wages, food insecurity, and other factors brought by the burden of inflation. These conditions are failing students. As one of the most populous provinces in the country, Ontario plays a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape. The provincial government must make drastic changes in order to provide a post-secondary education system that is built by students and for students.

Ontario has some of the highest domestic tuition fees in the country, along with Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia.¹ It has the highest average tuition fees, including both domestic and International undergraduate and graduate fees, with an average of \$23,055 annually.² This is 34.8% higher than the average fees of Nova Scotia, the next most expensive province.

Ontario students pay an average of \$8,190 annually, approximately 236% more than students in Quebec (\$3,461) and Newfoundland and Labrador (\$3,481), which have the lowest tuition fees.³

Average annual tuition fees by province³



ON – \$8,190



NL – \$3,481



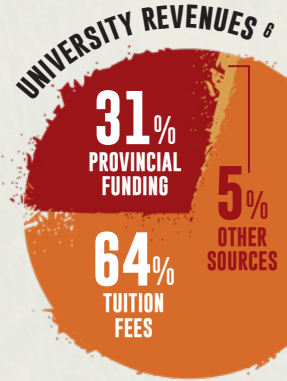
QC – \$3,461

These high tuition fees add to the enormous financial burdens that students in Ontario already face. Students are deeply affected by the rising cost of food, rent and other basic necessities. According to one survey, 25.6% of post-secondary students, specifically 2SLGBTQ+ and racialized students, reported sacrificing food in order to afford other necessities such as rent or tuition.⁴ Confronted with the bleak realities

of astronomically high tuition, students in this province are struggling to get by.

Ontario's high tuition fees are not inevitable. Instead, they are a result of a severely underfunded system, due to a steady decline in public funding. In 1990, government funding covered 80% of operating funding, the largest source of post-secondary institution revenue, while tuition fees only covered 18%⁵. Over decades, a significant decline in Ontario public funding has inverted these ratios.

Now, 64% of university and 24% of colleges operating funding comes from tuition fees, while only 31% comes from provincial funding.⁶



As a result, colleges and universities rely on student fees to make up for the drastic public funding loss. The resulting funding structure for higher education in Ontario lacks both fairness and sufficiency. International students are particularly exploited in this model, accounting for huge portions of tuition fees due to their egregiously high differential fees. In the 2021–2022 academic year, **close to 19% of full-time students were international students—yet, these students contributed nearly half (48.4 percent) of all tuition fees in the province.** Ontario has descended to the lowest rates of post-secondary funding in the country, shamelessly exploiting International students to barely sustain a system that is falling apart at the seams.

Post-Secondary Education allows young individuals to improve their ways of life through increased social mobility, advance social cohesion and encourages a highly skilled workforce.⁷

The employment rate of adults in Ontario with a bachelor's degree age 25 and above is 74.6%. For those without a diploma, degree or certification, the employment rate is 30%, a difference of 44.6%.⁸ This proves that having accessible education is a central component to Ontario's socio-economic development. However, students are struggling to reap these benefits due to high tuition fees.

In 2019, the average household student debt in Ontario had grown to \$23,100— \$5,125 more than the average for the rest-of-Canada, which sits at \$17,975.⁹ Evidently, the current system of PSE in Ontario is far from being equitable or accessible. According to Statistics Canada, **64% of the 2015 graduates who graduated with student debt still had an outstanding debt after three years in 2018.** Additionally, the rate of students with debt in Ontario is at 39.6%, which is significantly higher than other provinces.¹⁰

As tuition fees increase, and financial aid grants decrease, these metrics are expected to rise, leaving students in even greater states of financial instability.



These ongoing cuts have already affected the quality and accessibility of education that students rightfully deserve. Education is a right— yet, in the ongoing crisis in Post-Secondary Education, students are the ones carrying the burden of escalating costs. The fees in Ontario persist at unusually high levels, presenting formidable obstacles for post-secondary students striving to pursue their education and secure their future.

With the hope of this future in mind, the Federation calls on the provincial government to progressively eliminate tuition fees by 25% annually, towards the elimination of tuition fees for all. Additionally, while tuition fees remain, the Federation calls on the provincial government to transform all loans to grants, so that all students can access post secondary education regardless of the cost. With these measures, the provincial government can begin to build a post-secondary system that truly ensures education for all.

As a result, colleges and universities rely on student fees to make up for the drastic public funding loss. The resulting funding structure for higher education in Ontario lacks both fairness and sufficiency. International students are particularly exploited in this model, accounting for huge portions of tuition fees due to their egregiously high differential fees. In the 2021–2022 academic year, **close to 19% of full-time students were international students—yet, these students contributed nearly half (48.4 percent) of all tuition fees in the province.** Ontario has descended to the lowest rates of post-secondary funding in the country, shamelessly exploiting International students to barely sustain a system that is falling apart at the seams.

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RESPECT INDIGENOUS LEARNERS' RIGHT TO EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATION:

Increase targeted grants to Indigenous student services, and double the funding to Indigenous Institutes.

Indigenous students are consistently unsupported in the Post-Secondary Education system. The continued processes of settler-colonialism has an ongoing impact on Indigenous students today as they continue to face racism from institutions, and be shut out from accessing necessary supports such as the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP).



This is demonstrated by the fact that **only 37% of people with Indigenous identity aged 25-64 have a college diploma or university degree**, compared to the 54% of attainment among Canadians within the same age range¹¹.

Indigenous students are a vibrant aspect of educational communities, and while often tokenized by their respective institutions, are left with very little provincial or institutional resources. Though the financial inaccessibility of Post-Secondary Education remains one of the largest barriers for many Indigenous students, a lack of community connection and Indigenous-specific mental health services also form deep barriers¹². Ultimately, Indigenous learners, as with everyone, have the fundamental right to education and increased funding to targeted grants for Indigenous student support services at colleges and universities, along with a doubling in funding to Indigenous Institutes would help eliminate some of the many existing barriers to access.

Educational access for Indigenous students is underfunded. While financial assistance is typically provided to Indigenous students attending a Post-Secondary institution via the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), the amount of this funding has been capped at only 2% annual growth from 1996 and 2016¹³. This funding is crucial as a mitigating factor, however, it fails to cover tuition and educational expenses in their entirety and many students do not receive funding at all¹⁴. PSSSP funding remains inaccessible for those who are non-status, Métis, and involved with ongoing land disputes¹⁵.

These students are left to fund their education themselves.

This is a difficult endeavour especially given the employment gap and disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities; in 2021 the employment rate in Indigenous communities was lower by approximately 12% when compared with the non-Indigenous population¹⁶.

Indigenous people are significantly underrepresented within Post-Secondary Education as a whole; **as of 2021, just under half of Indigenous adults had completed some level of post-secondary studies with the highest level being college or other non-university certifications**¹⁷. The harm these students can and often do experience on campuses or in academic spaces plays a role in the aforementioned disparities.

Racism, isolation, and the marginalization of Indigenous student knowledge are forms of discrimination that 45% of Indigenous students have had to contend with.

Additionally, Indigenous students report facing higher levels of sexual harassment^{18,19}. The lack of services on post-secondary campuses may have a role to play. Many Indigenous students cite a need for holistic supports on- and off-campus such as mental health supports, academic supports, and housing resources; conversely, Indigenous Student Services offices speak to a lack of funding, support from institutions, and very few permanent spaces on campus²⁰. Given this lack of accessibility, university and college campuses are often not viable options for Indigenous students, and many choose to seek other opportunities because of it.

The discrimination that Indigenous students face on campuses also emphasizes the need for Indigenous Institutes geared towards Indigeneity in all aspects.

Currently in this province, there are nine recognized Indigenous Institutes that provide an environment for Indigenous students to learn in a flexible and culturally reflective environment.²¹ These institutions provide necessary services to Indigenous students and rely on the provincial government for majority of their funding, however, this funding is insufficient at ~\$444,400 annually for each institute.²² **A direct consequence of this is that only 15% of Indigenous Institutes have dedicated study spaces and off-campus housing assistance, and 35% have counselling services and cafeterias, whereas 100% of colleges and universities in Ontario offer all of these services.**²³ Indigenous institutions fulfill a necessary need for educational access and opportunities for Indigenous communities, and increasing available funding for these institutions would remove some crucial barriers.

The Federation calls on the provincial government to respect Indigenous learners' right to education.

The full and comprehensive funding for Indigenous education is of the utmost importance. This means that the provincial government must dedicate increased funding to targeted grants for Indigenous student services on campus, and double the funding to Indigenous Institutes. With these measures, post-secondary institutions in the province can start to address the shortcomings and make a commitment to support Indigenous students, so that Indigenous students can pursue post-secondary education without systemic, social, or economic barriers.

FAIRNESS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

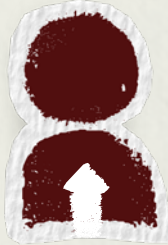
RECOMMENDATION:

Regulate International student tuition as a provisional measure towards eliminating tuition fees for International students entirely.

In the past decade, the federal government and post-secondary institutions have made huge efforts to attract International student enrollments, achieving such high levels of recruitment that it leads other countries in the increasing numbers.²⁴ International students play a crucial role in shaping the labour market, through the aims of diversifying the education sector, boosting its capacity through innovation and many more.²⁵ Ontario, being the largest province, has become an increasingly popular destination for International students as they expect many advantages in getting education in the country. Yet, while the numbers of International students increase twofold, the tuition fees that post-secondary institutions impose continue to rise. Because of this, International students face a lack of access to support and services, resulting in precarious conditions, and exploitation from employers. The number of International students pursuing their undergraduate studies in the country drastically increased

from 2015-2016 to 2019-2020, totalling a 154% increase for colleges, and 39.6% increase for universities.²⁶

39.6%
increase in
international
undergraduates
between 2015 and
2019 for universities²⁶



154%
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international
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In Ontario itself, student enrolments from 2015-2016 doubled in 2019-2020. **In 2015-2016, there were 96,492 International students enrolled in the province— by 2019-2020, 192,206 International students were enrolled, showing an annual growth of 18.8%.**²⁷ The disparity in tuition fees adds pressure, preventing students from engaging and focusing on their studies. With the accelerating increase of International students, the lack of access to support puts International students in vulnerable positions that have resulted in xenophobic and discriminatory policies and sentiments. In the past year, international students had to face being turned away from food banks due to their student visa. Another issue that International students are currently facing is by being blamed for the ongoing housing crisis in Ontario, even though it has been an existing problem for the past 30 years which makes them more prone to encounter scams, predatory landlords and unsafe housing situations as they lack status, desired credit scores and guarantors in the country.²⁸

With the difficulties of settling in a new country such as securing suitable housing, lack of status, encountering scams, dealing with exploitative landlords and employers, and enduring

unsafe and unsanitary living conditions, International students frequently experience the worst that Ontario has to offer.²⁹ Now, the Federal government is reversing its recruitment strategy by putting a cap on International student visas, once again demonstrating that International students are viewed as a commodity to be collected or cast away at the whims of a discriminatory government.

On the whole, students in Ontario—both domestic and International—are already experiencing a lot of barriers because of the government’s failure to prioritize Post-Secondary Education, particularly on the economic need to fund post-secondary institutions.

This became an opportunity for colleges and universities to depend on International students’ fees to offset costs.

The recent proposed policies from the government do not offer concrete solutions. Rather, they proposed a temporary two year cap and the anticipated cuts of student visa approvals to 360,000 for this year, a 35% cut from 2023.³⁰ **The proposed solution from the federal government potentially puts both domestic and international students at risk,** as it could lead to an increase to tuition fees indefinitely. In Ontario’s current situation, with its skyrocketing rent, insufficient wages, increasing food prices, students are one of the heavily affected populations in terms of affordability issues. Students have to carry a burden of financial hardships, while balancing their academic responsibilities. The burden is twice on International students. Data has already shown that International students are at higher risk experiencing food insecurity³¹ and troubles of finding long-term and affordable housing³².

On top of this, International students are also facing unregulated tuition fees, where Canadian academic institutions are given the decision to set their tuition fees as they wish; hence, it could increase without notice since 1996. This is in comparison to their domestic counterparts, where tuition fees have been on freeze for the last three years. The distressing reality is that International students encounter severe disparities within Ontario's Post-Secondary Education system, as shown by the significantly higher tuition fees imposed on them. This situation is perpetuated by the substantial financial burden imposed by differential fees. **In the 2023–2024 academic year, International undergraduate students in Ontario paid an average of \$46,433— approximately 466% more than domestic students.**³³

In addition to high differential fees, International students must pay high premiums for private health insurance plans. For a time, International students in Ontario were included in the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). However, this right was revoked in 1994, leaving International students to pay for their care. These private plans, operated through the institutions, often cost from \$800-\$1200, adding yet another essential cost to the steep bill that International students already pay annually for education. These plans are often hard to navigate, and not accepted by all healthcare providers, meaning that International students often go without necessary care. This obstacle, coupled with the unsafe working and living conditions that International students face, causes detrimental effects to student mental and physical health.

With these circumstances, the Federation asserts the need for an urgent action.



These demands include regulating tuition fee increases, followed by the elimination of both differential fees and tuition fees entirely for International students. The financial contributions of International students further bolster the local economy by supporting expenditures on housing, food, and various other necessities throughout their academic tenure. The surplus in international Post-Secondary Education serves as an exported commodity, aligning seamlessly with the nation's overarching strategy of fostering export-led growth. Moreover, institutions of higher learning that recruit International students without prioritising their integration and well-being throughout their academic journey; essentially perpetuating academic imperialism, all while masquerading under the guise of advancing an expanding education system.³⁴



The significant increase of International students who reside in Ontario to seek education has perpetuated a system where wealthier students are more likely to pursue education since they are the ones who can afford to do so. Meanwhile, low to middle-class students are left to fend for themselves, or through private financial institutions, which sets them up for debt. The troubling instances of exploitation faced by International students coupled with the overwhelming pressure to excel, have resulted in worsening mental health conditions, financial states, and precarious jobs situations. Immediate action and proactive policies are needed.

The government, along with post-secondary institutions, must take measures to ensure the well-being of International students, preventing any form of exploitation through the means of restoring sufficient funding for Post-Secondary Education in Ontario, so educational institutions will no longer be relying on the foreign fees as a way to generate revenues.

The Federation demands the provincial government regulate International tuition fees immediately, as a provisional measure towards eliminating International tuition fees entirely. This is the only way to end the exploitation of International students and ensure education for all.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

RECOMMENDATION:

Eliminate Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) cuts and increase ODSP for all people.

Students with disabilities deserve equal access to Post-Secondary Education. Unfortunately, these students are left behind, leading to economic and social disadvantages long after graduation. In general, disabled people in the province face huge barriers to safety, comfort, ease of living, and prosperity, due in large part to the lack of financial aid that they have access to. For disabled students, these barriers are compounded by the unique barriers of the Post-Secondary Education system, including prohibitive costs, structural impediments, and social isolation. Many of these disadvantages would be reduced with greater financial support. Though the provincial government raised ODSP by 6.5% in July 2023, disabled people are still struggling to meet their basic needs. The Federation calls on the Ontario government to increase the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) in consultation with disability advocacy groups, so that disabled students and disabled community members can freely pursue work, studies, and basic living without the burden of scrambling to cover the associated costs.



At \$1,308/month, the maximum rate of ODSP is still drastically short of the poverty line, meaning that those with disabilities still struggle to afford basic necessities.³⁵

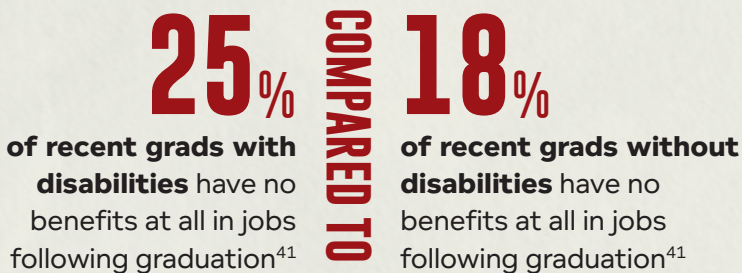
For instance, disabled people are disproportionately represented amongst food bank clients, and many cite ODSP as their main source of income.³⁶ Many disability advocacy groups report that people with disabilities are also more likely to experience homelessness.³⁷ This lack of care, support, and funds has spurred some disabled people to pursue Medical Assistance In Dying (MAID), indicating that some people with disabilities find the lack of support fundamentally inadequate for living. It is clear that disabled people are struggling to survive, let alone work, go to school or rest.

Increased ODSP is also crucial for supporting post-secondary students with disabilities. Students with disabilities face greater financial instability than their counterparts, and are more likely to experience food and housing insecurity.^{38,39}

According to a survey, 38% of students with disabilities have experienced homelessness.⁴⁰

Disabled students are also more likely to have to live in unsafe, unsanitary, or inadequate housing due to cost. These precarious conditions have significant effects on a student's ability to focus on their studies. Without the security of safe, clean, adequate housing that meets their access needs, students are left in a state of discomfort and stress, which endangers their physical and mental well-being. It also prevents students with disabilities from resting, leading to states of burnout. Disabled students need adequate funding, so that they can afford accessible housing and pursue their studies without the additional burden of navigating unsafe housing.

Achieving equity for disabled students would have lasting positive impacts on disabled graduates. This is because people with disabilities face increased disadvantages on the labour market compared to their counterparts, and these effects are seen almost immediately post-graduation. In jobs following graduation, 25% of recent grads with disabilities have no benefits at all, compared to 18% of recent grads without a disability.⁴¹



Additionally, **the unemployment rate for graduates with disabilities is much higher than those without a disability.**⁴² If the barriers during Post-Secondary Education are reduced, graduates with disabilities may see favorable outcomes on the labour market, having experienced fewer barriers in post-secondary education. Though barriers to employment are complex and multi-faceted, better financial aid for those with disabilities may work to offset the employment injustices they face.

The inadequacy of ODSP, even with the recent increase, is staggering. No person can be expected to subsist on such meager income, let alone those who have greater costs due to needing specialized equipment, accommodations, and care. The 6.5% increase also does not apply to specific kinds of support, such as the Special Diets Allowance and the Remote Communities Allowance. Additionally, students are concerned that the federal government's recent announcement of the Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) will spur the provincial government to clawback ODSP. **The new CDB is not an opportunity to reduce ODSP, but rather an opportunity for the provincial and federal governments to work together to finally bring those relying on social support for disability above the poverty line.** Reducing ODSP is highly inadvisable, as clawbacks of any kind can deprive people with disabilities of necessary support.

Given the often dire circumstances that disabled people in the province are facing, the Federation calls on the provincial government to eliminate clawbacks, increase ODSP to adequate rates, and provide this support to all who need it, regardless of immigration status. Students insist that all people with disabilities be considered in these provisions, meaning that disabled International students and non-status individuals must be made eligible for ODSP without delay. It is also essential that these negotiations take the lead from community members with disabilities, so that the new regulations better address the true needs of disabled people.

The current conditions that disabled people in the province live under are unacceptable.

We the students call for this to be remedied immediately. With increased support, students and people with disabilities can more easily meet their needs and pursue their interests, passions, and aspirations.

JUSTICE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

RECOMMENDATION:

Increase provincial funding to graduate students, and eliminate graduate student tuition fees.

Without graduate students, operations at research institutions would grind to a halt. Graduate students drive the relevance, energy, and prospects of academia, making huge contributions to the progress of all fields, including politics, medicine, art, engineering, and ethics. As the engineers of innovative research projects, graduate students provide key developments to old and new issues such as health epidemics, systemic oppression, artificial intelligence, technological change and the climate crisis. The importance of graduate students is demonstrated by the fact that one third of publications in Canada feature PhD students as authors or co-authors.⁴³ Graduate students also collaborate with renowned researchers on crucial projects, teach students, and perform departmental service, all while carrying out their own research. Despite their indispensability, graduate students are vastly undersupported by institutions and the provincial government. Without greater graduate student support, Ontario could see its research

landscape floundering as graduate students exit the province in search of more equitable circumstances.

Graduate students do not receive adequate compensation. Graduate funding in Canada has not increased for over two decades.

As a result, most graduate students in the province are underpaid, subsisting on \$25,000 a year or less.⁴⁴ This is below the Ontario poverty line for a single person.⁴⁵

One survey found that the average stipend for masters students amounted to \$9.18/h, and \$11.3/h for doctoral students, assuming a 40-hour work week, though most graduate students work beyond this. Additionally, those who identify as women, disabled, gender non-conforming, or a visible minority were less likely to receive research funding; Black, Middle-Eastern, Latin-American, and South Asian respondents were more likely to report struggling financially, while Indigenous respondents received significantly less funding on the whole.⁴⁶

Students are also expected to pay tuition out of their funding.

Ontario graduate students pay an average of \$9,445 annually for tuition, which is 24.7% higher than the national average. Furthermore, International graduate fees in Ontario are on average \$27,149, the highest in the country.⁴⁷ The scarcity of funding, coupled with the high costs of tuition and living, leaves many students in states of high financial stress.

The inadequacy of their stipends leads to greater rates of food and housing insecurity among graduate students.⁴⁸

Because of this, some unions representing graduate students have had to increase their emergency support for their members.



At Queen's University, Local 901 of the Public Service Alliance of Canada—which represents graduate teaching assistants, teaching fellows, and postdoctoral fellows—handed out \$30,000 in grocery gift cards in one semester in 2023.⁴⁹ A survey of graduate students in Canada found that graduate students have significant financial concerns.

43.4% of respondents indicated that they were either frequently struggling to make ends meet, or that finances were so tight, they were forced to make sacrifices to afford necessities.⁵⁰

85.7% of respondents reported stress/anxiety about their finances during graduate studies, and 27% of respondents reported always or often worrying about their ability to pay their bills.⁵¹ Given these responses, it's no surprise that 52% of respondents had outstanding debt —11% with debt between \$30k and \$50k, and 7% with debt over \$50k.

These vast financial burdens leave a significant impact on graduate students. Many graduate students develop poor mental health, with 60% of graduate students reporting feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed.⁵² These conditions are highly unsustainable for graduate students, leading many to burnout.⁵³ Correcting these inequities is a matter of increased funding, reduced tuition, and departmental support.

60%

of graduate students reporting feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed.⁵²

Though most graduate funding comes from federal agencies, the provincial government has an important role to play in supporting graduate students. **The Ontario Graduate Scholarship, which provides funding to selected graduate students, only provides a maximum of \$15,000 a year,** with a maximum of 2 years for funding for master's students, and 4 years of funding for doctoral students.

This amount hardly makes a dent in the cost of living.

While the Ontario 2023 budget did commit \$32.4 million to research internships through Mitacs—a nonprofit that builds research so-called partnerships between schools, governments, and industries— this funding is not available to all graduate students, relies on an external organization to partner students to industries, and is irrelevant for students whose work diverges from industry.⁵⁴ As the funding from the provincial government declines, and graduate work becomes increasingly reliant on market outcomes, graduate students experience not only the struggle of competing with the cost of living, but also the struggle of competing with their peers. Many graduate students cite the competitive environment of graduate studies as a cause for their



feelings of stress, and often have to contend with one another for better compensation.⁵⁵ This competitive environment is fed by a scarcity of funding. Graduate students need more than internships and meager grants; they need robust, consistent public funding that is independent from profit motives.

The Federation urges the provincial government to increase funding to the Ontario Graduate Scholarship to ensure that all graduate students in Ontario receive stipends that at least cover the cost of living.

Additionally, the Federation calls on the provincial government to eliminate tuition fees for all graduate students. With these commitments, the provincial government can pull graduate students out of financial insecurity, and retain the vital minds that power a robust, stable research system. With better funding and happier graduate students, this province can produce a system that drives social, political, and scientific change.

LEGISLATE STUDENTS' RIGHT TO ORGANIZE

RECOMMENDATION:
Implement legislation to protect
students' rights to organize.

Students in the province have been faced with constant attacks on their right to organize by the Ontario government and administrations. When confronted with tactics of union busting, students have organized their campuses to fight back, showing administrators and decision makers that students will not be silenced when their rights are attacked and threatened. Students know that it is possible for lawmakers to legislate their right to organize. When the right to organize is protected, student groups and unions can thrive, offering valuable events, services and campaigns to their membership. This is why students are calling on the provincial government to legislate the students' right to organize.

The discussion about legislative protections for students' unions is exemplified by the Student Choice Initiative (SCI) policy. The SCI was a policy created in 2019 by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) and it was to create a system of opt-outs for democratically determined student ancillary

fees and designed to dramatically change the framework around ancillary fees. The MTCU unilaterally rendered ancillary fees optional for students' unions, student-run service centres such as food banks, sexual violence support centres, and campus media in Ontario. The impact of this policy was immediately felt by student groups, unions, and provincial and national organizations who had historically relied on student fees to carry out their services and programs designed for students. By arbitrarily deeming ancillary fees optional, the policy attempted to render student organizations on campus either defunct or limited in operation.

Student organizations are for students by students, offering services that are not offered by the administration or the government.

For instance, students' unions operate food centres in a time when food prices have skyrocketed where there is an increase of 38% of people accessing food support in Ontario.



Students continue to fill the gaps left by the government and institutions and serve a crucial and vital service to members who are otherwise being turned away from off campus food resources.⁶² It is vital that students' unions and other student groups have the stable funding needed to support students. Fundamental to the operation of these vital services is the mandatory membership fees many student groups need in order to support its students in return, and properly represent all students. Students' unions are more than just service providers, but are also a pivotal vehicle for student organizing, which is

continually under attack from administration and governments alike. **Students' unions provide an important discourse within Post-Secondary Education**, which strengthens the sector overall and provides fundamental democratic representation for students. The Ontario government's use of the SCI tampered with the crucial democratic and funding structures of student organizations and jeopardized students' right to organize on campus.

Due to student organizing and a legal challenge, students defeated the Student Choice Initiative policy in November of 2019, when Ontario courts ruled that the SCI policy unlawful as it was not consistent with the existing statutory practices regulating colleges and universities in Ontario. Although this decision helped restore student organizing on campus, it does not guarantee it forever. What is needed is a protective legal framework to ensure the autonomy of students' associations and student groups along with post-secondary institutions are never at risk again. To fill this legislative void, it is imperative that the provincial government create legislation that recognizes and protects students' right to organize.

There are other jurisdictions in which legislative protections exist for student organizations.

In Québec and British Columbia, students have won protections for their students' unions—this is also achievable for students in Ontario. In Québec, the Act Respecting the Accreditation and Financing of Students' Associations outlines how students' unions fees are collected, the remittance of students' association membership dues and the rights of student members within their organization. This legislative protection also protects students' right to associate, something that the Student Choice Initiative attempted to disrupt.

In British Columbia, under Part 6 of its University Act, section 27.1, recognizes the importance of student organizations and respects the democratic processes of student referendums and the fees determined by such practices.⁶³ The ways in which this legislation deals with the collection and remittance of student fees within pre-existing legislation is another example of how students' right to associate is respected but also protected.

Legislation to protect student's right to organize is not new in this province. In 2011, Bill 184 was presented to address the need for provincial legal protection for students' unions and groups. The draft legislation addressed the definition of membership being inclusive of all students at an institution as per their level of study, outlined the relationship between the administration and the students' union, and had clear processes for membership fee collection and remittance. Although the Ontario legislature was unsuccessful in adopting Bill 184 due to a provincial election, legislation similar to Bill 184 could be reintroduced and strengthened with the consultation with both students' unions and the Federation.

Due to policies such as the Student Choice Initiative, it is imperative that there be legal protections for students' unions, student groups and campus media in order to respect the autonomy and democratic processes of students' organizations.

The Act outlines the responsibilities of both the government through the MCU and students' associations and it makes clear the relationship between administration and students. This act could serve as a template for drafting new legislation on this matter.



The development of legislation to protect students' right to organize amplifies student advocacy both on campus and within the province and is a **public benefit to the Post-Secondary Education sector**. Such legislation should include language guaranteeing the right of membership to students' organizations and language to guarantee the collection and remittance of membership fees as determined by student referenda.

The Federation calls on the provincial government to immediately begin drafting this legislation, so that student voices across the province can be protected from future interference.



CONCLUSION

Students in Ontario are experiencing a crisis on all fronts. Students in Ontario are struggling as public funding is declining while the cost of living skyrockets. Students are receiving less financial support to live more expensive lives. Indigenous students continue to see a lack of support, and calls for their right to education to be recognized go unanswered. International student tuition continues to increase unpredictably, leaving International students scrambling to cover the cost, often taking on precarious work and unsafe living conditions to do so. Graduate students and students with disabilities see stagnating or inadequate support, a testament to the systemic neglect that they face even in times of record inflation. Finally, students across the province face repeated attacks on their rights to organize, putting the future of campus life and student organizing in jeopardy.

Despite the dire circumstances, students will not back down.

We the students believe in a post-secondary education system that is built for students and by students, where no one gets left behind. We the students believe in a system that puts people over profit, that prioritizes public good over private gains. We the students believe that our rights to organize must be protected as we continue to be at the forefront of change. We the students believe in a system that provides high quality, accessible education for all. Students will continue to struggle for this future. **Students will continue to demand for change.**



The Federation calls on the provincial government to fulfill its duty to the province, and invest in students.

We call for increased public funding for post-secondary education, increased support for all students, free education and legislation for the protection of students' rights to organize. This is the only way to ensure a stable and equitable future for students, and for the province. With the removal of financial barriers and increased funding we can ensure all students have access to a high-quality post-secondary education.

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