# WHO GOES? WHO PAYS?

## Part 2: An Examination of Financial Barriers to Postsecondary Access

studentsNS

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# Abstract

Building on Students Nova Scotia's values of accessibility and affordability, this report examines the intersection of informational, attitudinal, and financial barriers to accessing postsecondary education (PSE), particularly for students from underrepresented groups. Significant past research has emphasised the role of financial barriers in accessing PSE, yet less provincial research has focused on examining the other determinants of PSE access, including attitudinal, informational, and demographic factors. As such, the first report in our series examining PSE access will focus on social determinants, with the subsequent instalment focusing on the financial barriers to PSE in the province.

In the first instalment of this report, we examine enrolment and persistence trends at Nova Scotia postsecondary institutions, as well as provincial retention following graduation. We acknowledge the importance of placing equal value upon all postsecondary options available to students in creating an inclusive and accessible postsecondary climate in Nova Scotia.

In the second instalment of this report, we discuss the various costs associated with PSE in Nova Scotia, how domestic fees are regulated and how they have evolved over time. We analyse the financial assistance programs available to students at both a provincial and federal level before, during, and after their enrolment. We examine student financial aid program uptake, as well as potential uptake deterrents and ways in which these deterrents can be combated. A focus is placed upon unmet need - in which students face levels of monetary need beyond financial assistance program maximums – and potential strategies to address this pressing issue, especially as affordability pressures grow in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These topics are viewed through a multi-dimensional lens, acknowledging the importance of understanding the different types of social and financial barriers involved in postsecondary access and how these barriers interact, particularly for students in underrepresented groups. Through this perspective, we hope to address the informational barriers Nova Scotia students face throughout the postsecondary decision-making process. We also seek to identify areas for improvement in the financial programming available to these students once they have made the decision to access postsecondary education.

# Statement of Values

Students Nova Scotia is built upon the belief that post-secondary education can play a fundamental role in allowing both the individual and society to realise their full potential. Students Nova Scotia's values are pillars built upon this foundation. They give direction to Students Nova Scotia's work and reflect our organisational goals.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Every qualified Nova Scotia student who wishes to pursue postsecondary education should be able to do so, irrespective of their financial situation, socioeconomic or ethnic background, physical, psychological, or mental ability, age, sexual orientation, geographic location, or any other factor exogenous to qualification.

## AFFORDABILITY

The cost of postsecondary education in Nova Scotia should not cause undue hardship upon any student, during or after their time at a postsecondary institution, restrict their ability to pursue the career path they choose, or make them financially unable to live in the community of their choice.

## QUALITY

Policies, programs, and services in postsecondary education should meet student expectations to help prepare them for lifelong success, including in their citizenship, careers, and personal wellbeing.

## STUDENT VOICE

Nova Scotia students must be empowered to actively participate in influencing their postsecondary system's development via engagement through their respective student body representatives, within their postsecondary institutions themselves, and through the broader democratic process.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ***CBU*** | Cape Breton University |
| ***CESG*** | Canada Education Savings Grant |
| ***CESP*** | Canada Education Savings Program |
| ***CLB*** | Canada Learning Bond |
| ***CMEC*** | Councils of Ministers of Education, Canada |
| ***COL*** | Cost of Living |
| ***CSG*** | Canada Student Grants |
| ***CSLP*** | Canada Student Loan Program |
| ***EECD*** | Education and Early Childhood Development |
| ***GDP*** | Gross Domestic Product |
| ***MOU*** | Memorandum of Understanding |
| ***MPHEC*** | Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission |
| ***MSVU*** | Mount Saint Vincent University |
| ***NEET*** | Not in Education, Employment or Training |
| ***NSCAD*** | Nova Scotia College of Art and Design |
| ***NSCC*** | Nova Scotia Community College |
| ***NSSAP*** | Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program |
| ***NSSG*** | Nova Scotia Student Grant |
| ***OECD*** | Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development |
| ***OER*** | Open Educational Resources |
| ***PSE*** | Postsecondary Education |
| ***PSI*** | Postsecondary Institution |
| ***PSSSP*** | Postsecondary Student Support Program |
| ***RESP*** | Registered Education Savings Plan |
| ***SFA*** | Student Financial Assistance |
| ***SMU*** | Saint Mary's University |
| ***STFX*** | Saint Francis Xavier University |

# Introduction

There are many factors that influence one's decision to pursue – or to not pursue - postsecondary education (PSE). In our accompanying report on the social barriers to postsecondary access, we highlighted the need to view the decision to access education as one that does not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, social, attitudinal, and informational factors play a critical role in determining whether a young person views higher education as a viable option. As previously highlighted students seek out information on educational costs *after* they begin to see themselves in postsecondary.

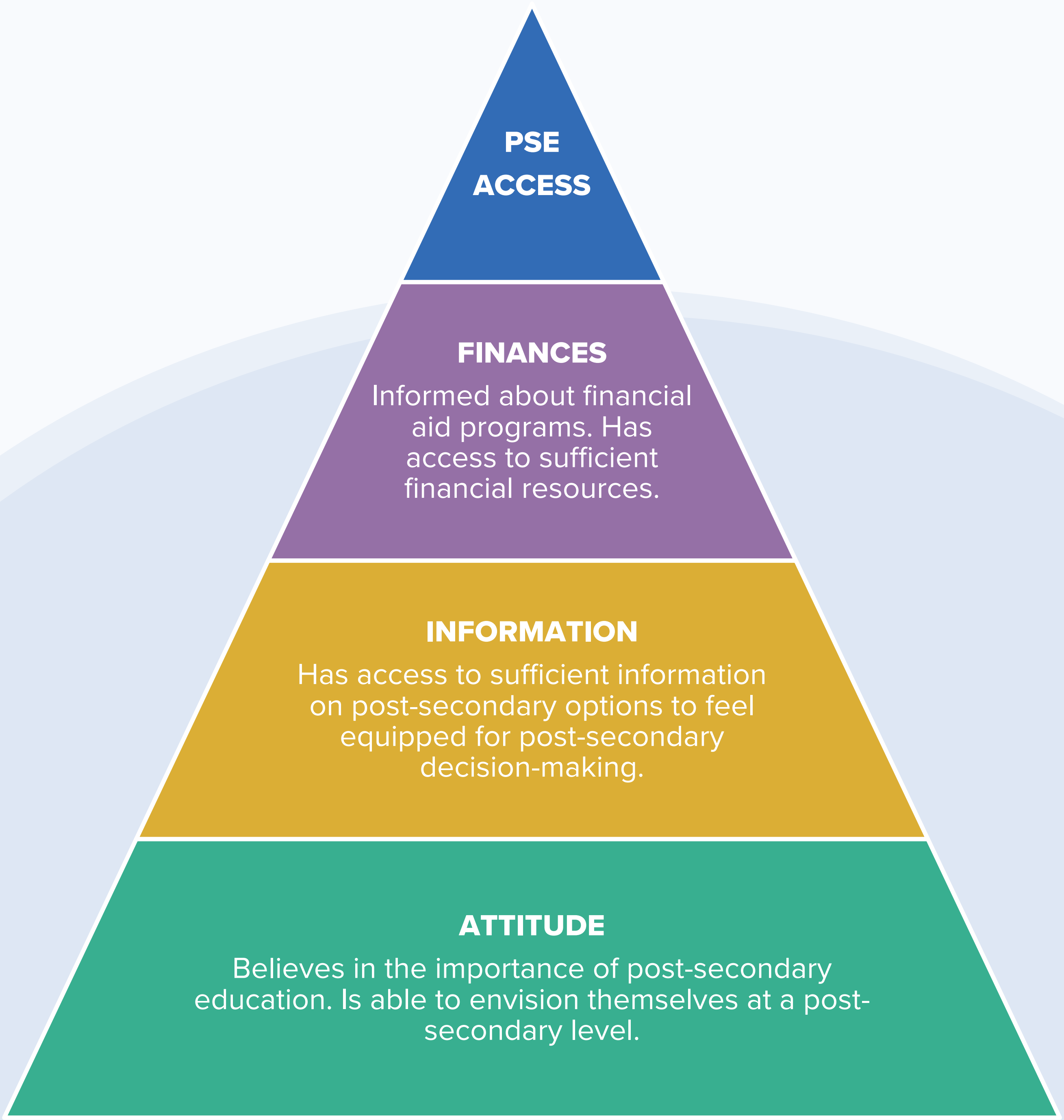
Research suggests that in order to improve accessibility and affordability of PSE, it may be best to view the factors limiting postsecondary access not as isolated barriers but as elements of a larger process, ensuring that students:

1. Believe in the ***importance of PSE*** and are able to ***envision themselves*** at PSE.
2. Have ***the right information*** to make informed PSE decisions.
3. Have sufficient information on ***financial assistance programs*** and secure appropriate funding so that educational costs do not exceed the available resources.

Though an examination of financial barriers alone is unlikely to give an accurate picture of access determinants without also examining the other social factors with which financial obstacles are intertwined, financial barriers are perhaps one of the most crucial determinants of student success and persistence to graduation after the decision to access PSE has been made. This is especially true as the affordability and inflationary pressures facing students continue to grow, with limited long-term improvements in measures addressing unmet need.

In April 2022, student advocacy groups across Canada released a joint publication entitled *Shared Perspectives on the Changing Landscape of Student Financial Aid.* In late 2022, Students Nova Scotia subsequently co-led a Maritime *More Than Tuition* campaign, hearing first-hand how the rising costs of education, living and more were impacting students.

In both these instances, it is apparent that although the decision to access postsecondary is complex, the importance of sufficient financial resources cannot be understated. As inflationary pressures grow and top-ups to federal funding are projected to sunset in the upcoming fiscal year, now is a pivotal junction for the government to examine how they can leverage financial programs and resources to best support the students seeking to unlock the societal and individual benefits of a postsecondary credential.


PSE ACCESS
FINANCES
Informed about financial aid programs. Has access to sufficient financial resources.
INFORMATION
Has access to sufficient information on post-secondary options to feel equipped for post-secondary decision-making.
ATTITUDE
Believes in the importance of post-secondary education. Is able to envision themselves at a post-secondary level.


# Financial Barriers to Postsecondary Access

# The Costs of Postsecondary Education

## Trends in University Tuition Regulation

Over the past six years between 2017-2023, the average tuition for full-time domestic undergraduates in Canada has increased 3.2% to $6,834[1]. Over the same period in Nova Scotia, average university tuition fees rose 20% from $7,718 to $9,328[2]; Nova Scotia tuition for full-time domestic undergraduates sits 36.5% above the current national average. In a year-over-year comparison, Nova Scotia undergraduate tuition rose by 3.2% between the 2021-22 and 2022-23[3]. Despite previously stated goals to progressively bring tuition more in line with the national average[4], ***Nova Scotia university tuition is well above the national average and increasing at a faster rate.***[5]

**CONCERN**

Domestic university tuition within Nova Scotia is the highest in the country, 36.5% over the national average. It is also increasing at a much faster rate than the federal average.

Moreover, international students are subject to increased tuition fees compared to their domestic counterparts who benefit from government subsidised education. As international students flock to Canadian universities, institutions are becoming more reliant on this increased tuition as a source of revenue. Across Canada, international tuition fees rose from an average of $27,613 to of $36,123 – a 30.8% increase – over the past 5 years[6]. International tuition in Nova Scotia increased by 19.8% over the same period - from $17,719 to $21,224[7]. While international tuition in the province remains significantly lower than the national average, this increase is nonetheless alarming considering that ***international student tuition is subject to little or no regulation.***

**CONCERN**

The lack of tuition regulation for international students causes them to face highly unpredictable and minimally transparent tuition increases year-over-year, with none of the corresponding upfront financial aid provided to their domestic peers.

Proposed tuition models for international students are currently evolving in the provincial landscape. In 2022, Dalhousie University announced a 'Guaranteed Tuition Model', where cohorts pay the same price for tuition throughout the duration of their program (up to five years total)[8]. Cohort-based models are being slowly adopted across the country to provide students stable, predictable annual tuition fees[9,10]. These models are not necessarily cheaper alternatives to annual increases, as set fees incorporate anticipated increases to operating expenditures. In Dalhousie's case, the 'Guaranteed Tuition Model', which will take effect in the 2023-24 academic year, coincides with an effort to align current international students' fees with the national average. While tuition prices vary by faculty, proposed increases in tuition from the 2022-23 to 2023-24 academic year range from 15% to 37%[11].

While this model provides certainty once a student has entered university, each subsequent cohort may face unregulated increases in fees compared to previous years'.

**CONCERN**

Though it increases predictability, the cohort-based model does little to lessen the upfront financial barriers international students face in accessing PSE. Further, without government regulations on international student tuition, the introduction of a cohort model can be used as a device by PSIs to make large one-time tuition increases appear more palatable.

The primary regulatory document for domestic tuition regulation and university funding in Nova Scotia is the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a five-year agreement between the provincial government and Nova Scotia universities[12]. Each MOU to date has chosen to address the policies surrounding tuition regulation in a slightly different fashion.

The 2012-2015 MOU agreed that "annual increases in tuition rates (would) be limited to 3%"[13], with the exemption of international student fees and some professional programs. The 2015-2019 MOU carried this policy forward; however, it also exempted graduate tuition from this cap and included an additional caveat allowing for "one-time market adjustments to tuition in order to charge similar amounts for similar programs at peer institutions"[14]. The policy gave universities the option to phase in the adjustments over the duration of the MOU, thus undermining the 3% increase cap. It also did not quantify how large this market adjustment could be, which allowed for tuition to rise over the course of the MOU agreement at the highest rate in Canada[15]. The resulting 2019-2024 MOU removed the market adjustment clause but maintained all other limitations that the two previous MOUs had introduced[16].

The Nova Scotia University Tuition Bursary, which is highlighted within the 2019-2024 MOU, is another provincial funding commitment to universities through subsidisation of upfront tuition costs. As the name suggests, this incentive is given to all in-province students studying at universities within Nova Scotia. The intended goal of the bursary is to lower tuition fees for Nova Scotia students closer to the national average; it currently provides a $1,283 annual reduction (for universities that bill on a course-by-course basis, the amount provided is $128.30 per course)[17]. ***This bursary offsets a portion of tuition but is not indexed to inflation and becomes a smaller proportion of overall tuition over time as rates continue to rise.***

**CONCERN**

Though initially created as a mechanism to bring Nova Scotia domestic tuition in line with the national average, the NS University Student Bursary is not indexed to inflation or tuition increases, thus representing a smaller proportion of tuition with each yearly increase in student fees. Further, the bursary systematically excludes college recipients.

The 2019-24 MOU regulated that university tuition fee schedules for each upcoming year must be submitted to the Province by April 30th of each year [18]; as such, students will complete each year of schooling without any certainty of the costs they will face the following September. The MOU should enable students to anticipate the true costs of their education beyond the upcoming year, as this uncertainty could serve as a deterrent to accessing PSE in the first place, in addition to a students' likelihood of persistence to graduation.

**CONCERN**

In the current fee model, university students are unable to precisely quantify the tuition fees they will pay over the course of their degree (beyond the current academic year). Releasing fees on a single-year basis only months before the start of the subsequent year minimises long-term fee predictability for international and domestic students alike.

**CONCERN**

University-provided estimates for student costs typically exclude non-academic expenses, such as living and housing costs.

| | Tuition | University Funding |
|---|---|---|
| **2019-2024** | 3% cap, removal of market adjustment clause. | 1% increase annually, tying funding to outcome measures re academics, student experience.<br><br>Additional funding for advancements in innovation, e-mental health, and the prevention of sexual violence. |
| **2015-2019** | 3% cap, allowed for "one time market adjustments". | 1% increase annually |
| **2012-2015** | 3% cap. | Annual grant decreases, by 4-, 3- and 3% respectively. |
| **2008-2011** | 3 Year Tuition Freeze.<br><br>Creation of the Nova Scotia University Student Bursary Program. | Funding formula based on average enrollment from 2003-2005 and projected costs during MOU length. |
| **2005-2008** | One-time tuition "reductions" for Nova Scotia students (2006-07, 2007-08). | Projected Costs + Inflation + Projected Tuition Revenue + Govts Fiscal Position. |

***Table 1:*** Comparison of tuition and university funding schemes among MOUs between the Province of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Universities from 2005 to 2024.

## Government Contributions to Nova Scotia Universities

Nova Scotia universities are funded through a combination of public and private expenditures – privately through tuition, student fees, and other sources and publicly through government grants. The contribution ratio has evolved over time; ***however, student dollars comprise the largest single contribution to revenue for almost all Nova Scotia universities.*** Government grants include restricted and unrestricted fees (also known as operating grants). The 2019-2024 MOU dictated that governments should increase their funding to universities at least an additional 1%

annually[19]. This 1% is less than the provincial Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation rate between 2021 and 2022[20]. Thus, ***government contributions to operating grants constitute an increasingly small portion of the total university system funding envelope with each passing year.***[21]

**CONCERN**

Government contributions to university operating budgets are currently increasing at a rate below that of inflation, as well as yearly increases to tuition. The proportion of university funding provided by the government decreases with each passing year, with students increasingly relied upon as the primary source of institutional revenue.

The 2019-2024 MOU also introduced Outcome Agreements, with aforementioned annual operating grants contingent upon successful achievement of set outcomes[22]. These agreements "include specific measures that will be taken by the universities to advance their long-term strategies and commitment to quality education, sustainability, and advancement of the priorities of the Province of Nova Scotia."[23]. The 2019-2024 MOU also stipulates that advancements in the areas of innovation, e-mental health, and the prevention of sexual violence will qualify universities for additional annual funding: Postsecondary Innovation ($1.685 million); e-mental health ($600,000); and sexual violence prevention ($470,000)[24]. ***The mechanisms for these outcomes remain private and confidential from the public, and in general may lack the measuring and reporting specificity to adequately hold these parties accountable to their shared goals.***

**CONCERN**

It can be challenging to quantify institutional accountability and progress on the objectives of the MOU.

Budget deficits arise when operating or capital planning expenditures are anticipated to exceed a university's resources. Recognizing the overall importance of universities to the Nova Scotia economy, the Universities Accountability and Sustainability Act was introduced in 2015, allowing the province to extend grants to institutions forecasting a "significant operating deficiency"[25]. Universities projecting a deficit threatening their sustainability in at least one year over a five-year period may request this emergency funding[26]. Further, the Act along with the 2019-2024 MOU requires that universities annually provide public and transparent financial reporting[27,28].

Reporting breakdowns of government contributions also vary significantly from institution to institution; some included federal and provincial contributions separately, others reported restricted and unrestricted (operating) grants separately, while still others referred to "other" government grants as a third category. These inconsistencies in reporting make transparent and clear-cut examination of data difficult. Figure 1 below highlights the proportion of university revenue composed by student fees in comparison with income from government contributions and other sources. Concerningly, only a portion of "government contributions" are defined as operating grants.

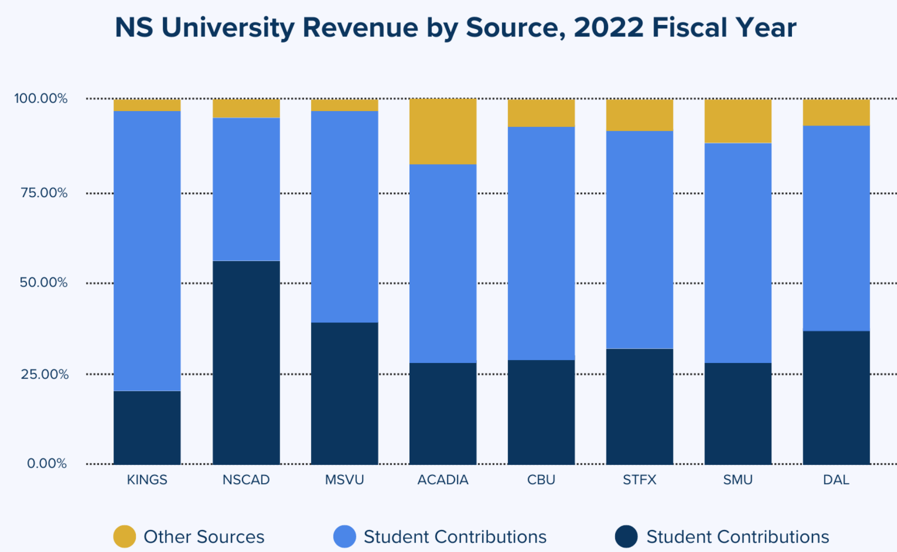



***Figure 1:*** Revenue sources for NS universities, 2022. Government contributions include reports of restricted and unrestricted funds, federally and provincially. Student contributions include reporting of ancillary fees, ancillary enterprises, residence fees and student fees. Based on public financial reports for 8 of the 10 NS universities.

## NSCC Tuition Fees and Funding

NSCC tuition has increased at a relatively consistent rate, and program costs overall are more affordable. For the 2022-23 academic year, tuition for full-time programs is expected to cost Nova Scotia students $3,620[29]; for part-time students the cost will be $478 per unit[30]. This difference is due to higher government subsidisation of NSCC programs and operations. In 2018, government contributions comprised over 72% of NSCC revenue, whereas 7.8% of revenue was contributed through student tuition fees[31]. This funding ratio minimises their dependence on students to fund operations and allows student fees to remain lower and to increase at a slower pace. Between 2017-18 and 2018-19, NSCC tuition increased by the same 3% as that regulated in universities[32], but due to lower tuition rates this increase only represented an estimated “additional $95 per student”[33].

In 2019, NSCC set – and released to the public – tuition fees for the next four years, showing increases of approximately 3% per year for both international and in-province students. This allows for a high level of predictability and transparency when students are choosing to attend and to persist in their education. As most students will spend less than two years at NSCC, many could predict the costs of their entire program upon enrolment.

## Textbooks

Beyond tuition fees, most students pay for a number of mandatory textbooks or educational materials each year, and the fees associated with these purchases are often prohibitive. Although data on textbook costs exists in Canada is limited, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that textbook costs in the United States had increased by 88% over a 10-year period[34]; this increase is likely even higher in Canada due to the tariffs placed on imported books[35]. The Government of Canada suggests that undergraduate students should expect to spend approximately $800 to $1000 on textbooks every year[36].

**CONCERN**

Although textbooks are crucial to a quality education for many students, the costs associated with these resources are often prohibitive and face low regulation.

Various reports have found many students base academic decisions on the cost such as textbooks; a British Columbia study found that 27% of students reported taking fewer courses as a result of associated textbook or material costs, whereas a quarter reported not registering for a course in the first place, and a further 17% reported dropping a course[37]. Students Nova Scotia’s 2022 *More Than Tuition* campaign saw many students sharing similar stories - some choose to cut back on essentials such as groceries in order to save for associated PSE costs - suggesting the rate of “give up to get” for educational materials in Nova Scotia may be even higher.

In a 2017 Maclean’s report, 6 out of 10 Nova Scotia universities were included on the list of the 50 Canadian postsecondary schools with the highest average overall costs of textbooks[38]. As students grapple with insufficient resources to fund their education, they increasingly opt not to purchase educational materials, which will no doubt have a negative impact on the quality of their education and overall academic performance. The aforementioned BC study found that cost deterred over half of students from purchasing a required textbook at least once in their academic career[39]. More concerningly, these students were more likely to be those with student loans or those working a higher number of hours at a part-time job[40]. This emphasises that higher associated course fees – such as textbooks – have disproportionately negative impacts on those with higher levels of financial need.

As textbook costs continue to rise, less traditional avenues of information delivery are being explored by individual institutions and government organisations across the country. As online learning and eCampuses become prevalent among Canadian postsecondary institutions, Open Educational Resources (OERs) are proving an accessible and affordable alternative to hard-copy textbooks. OERs provide a way for students to access free textbooks, academic materials and other resources online or in print at relatively little expense.

OERs are becoming increasingly popular in Canada, being developed and accessed by both provinces and individual institutions. In 2016, the Canada OER group was developed, representing a country-wide collaboration of educators in the development of high quality OERs[41]. Many provinces have embraced the opportunities that open educational platforms provide; British Columbia and Ontario in particular have been leaders in this initiative. Presently, the B.C. Open Textbook Project has achieved over $32 million dollars in student savings on textbooks through their work with OERs[42], while eCampus Ontario reported savings of over $15 million since their launch[43].

In 2020 StudentsNS supported the Council of Atlantic Academic Librarians (CAAL) launch of a pilot repository entitled AtlanticOER. This platform allows educators to share materials, access and adapt other educators' resources, and create their own OERs. To support the development of Atlantic-based educational resources, CAAL also provided faculty grants with an emphasis on first year/seminar courses to maximise savings. As of September 2022, there are 66 OERs housed or in development on the platform, 54 of which are from Nova Scotia colleges and universities[44]; to date, AtlanticOER has saved an estimated $344,000 for students across the region[45]. However, funding of the regional repository is not long-term, and is set to conclude at the end of the current fiscal year. ***Obtaining a sustainable funding source to support this OER hub is integral to its continued existence and success.***

**CONCERN**

Though OER repositories have seen significant uptake and savings for students at both institutional and regional levels, there is a lack of consistent buy-in or sustainable funding from government and institutions to promote continued OER expansion and innovation across the province.

## Auxiliary and Ancillary Fees

In addition to tuition and course materials, postsecondary students are levied with a range of expenses in the form of ancillary and auxiliary fees. Ancillary fees represent “non-academic services such as residence accommodation, food services, health services and student association [fees]”[46], whereas auxiliary costs are charged for “supplies, equipment, labs, field trips, items for programs or courses”[47] . ***These fees are determined by each postsecondary institution (PSI) independently on a yearly basis. This poses a threat to province-wide consistency and year-to-year predictability in student fees.***

Ancillary fees at NS universities have been consistently increasing in recent years, by 5% between 2019-20, by 10% between 2020-21 and 2021-22, and a further 2.9% between 2021-22 and 2022-23[48,49,50,51]. Exceptional increases in fees between 2020-21 and 2021-22 could be in part due to higher university expenditures to implement public health measures in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the current MOU dictates that increases in ancillary fees cannot be to compensate for an inability to raise tuition revenues beyond 3%, and these fees cannot exceed “increases in the costs of providing the services or goods”[52].

The average ancillary costs in 2022-23 were $953 (excluding meals and residence as well as medical plans). However, there’s a high variation institution-to-institution: the lowest institutional ancillary fee in 2022-23 was $518, whereas the highest was $1421[53]. These fees included student union fees, health services, athletic memberships and campus and facility renewal as well as an ‘other’ category for university-specific fees not observed across the board. The ‘other’ category is concerning as it is often not broken down to the extent of the other categories, such as a $568 charge identified only as a “technology fee” with no further indication of allocation[54].

**CONCERN**

Ancillary fees lack predictability and are widely variable across PSIs. There is a lack of transparency in the breakdown of - and review process for - the ancillary fees currently in place, sparking a need for clear, consistent itemization.

## Living Costs

After tuition, living costs are typically the largest expense for students who choose to live away from home. Housing is a significant factor in the decision to access postsecondary, students typically either rent an apartment or seek out on-campus accommodations, both of which have additional costs associated (utilities off-campus, mandatory meal plans on-campus). In 2022-23 the Nova Scotia student loan assessments allocated $637 monthly for shelter and a further $316 per month was deemed necessary for food expenses[55]. For the 8 months of a university's academic year, these estimates would set students back $7,624 for accommodations.

When comparing residence and meal-hall accommodation fees province-wide, the low-end average for 2022-23 (a double or multiple bedroom with the lowest-priced meal plan) was $7252, and the high-end average (single room with the highest-priced meal plan) was $15215[56]. It should be noted that most lower-cost meal plan options limit access to dining halls and do not provide students 3-daily meals throughout the week. If a student accessed the most expensive food and lodging options available, they would pay an average of 109% more than the amounts governments estimated students would require for off-campus living[57].

The high costs of on-campus accommodations increase the likelihood of these students facing ***unmet need*** – need beyond the maximum amount that can be provided by student loans. University students are currently eligible for a maximum of $13,940 in student loans per academic year[58]; Even if students access the lowest-cost options for on-campus accommodations, they would be left with only $6,688 to allocate towards tuition. At current cost, this would only offset tuition fees for an average of one semester and cover some ancillary fees. Living at home to minimise costs is not an ideal solution for many, and not only because of transportation barriers that make this impossible for the majority of students.

Not only are government cost-of-living estimates for Nova Scotia students incompatible with on-campus living, they are also increasingly not reflective of the costs faced by off-campus students.

As of 2021, the average rental costs of the 2-bedroom apartments in Halifax was reported to be $1,335 (667.50 per renter), with a overall vacancy of 1% in the city[59]. When combined with additional necessary expenses such as utilities and groceries, the cost of living in Halifax for an academic year far exceeds the amount provided through government estimates. The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) estimates that off-campus university students can expect their annual cost of living to be between $21,060 and $33,060, in addition to tuition[60]. Additionally, these expenses are expected to rise due inflation rates which are reaching unprecedented levels since the onset of the pandemic; As of November 2022, Nova Scotia's CPI increased 8.6% year-over-year, with annual inflation peaking at 9.3%[61].

**CONCERN**

Living expenses both on- and off-campus are much higher than government estimates used to allocate financial aid and are a contributor to unmet need.

**CONCERN**

Increasing housing and living allocations in Student Financial Assistance without concurrently increasing the maximum amount of aid a borrower can receive will do little to address rising levels of unmet need.

| | Student COL Estimates for Loan Calculations | Estimated Actual Avg. COL in NS (2 bdrm, Halifax '21) | Avg. Min and Max On-Campus COL NS Universities '22 – '23 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Housing** | $637 monthly<br>$5,096/ academic year | $667.50/person/mth<br>$5,340/ academic year | $7,252 (avg of least expensive options) – $15,215 (avg of most expensive options). |
| **Food** | $316 monthly<br>$2,528/ academic year. | $2,528/academic year, using the same fee as govt calculation. | Included in overall accommodation fees above. |
| **Electricity/Heating** | Included in estimation of rental costs above. | Variable.<br><br>Est. $89/person/mth[62]<br>$712/ academic year | Included in overall accommodation fees above. |
| **Internet** | Included in estimation of rental costs above. | Variable.<br><br>Est. $35-$67.50/person/mth[63]<br>$230- $540/academic year. | Included in overall accommodation fees above. |
| **TOTALS** | $7,624/ academic year, province wide. | $8,810 - $9,120/ academic year (estimate for highest cost region). | $7,252 - $15,215 / academic year. |

***Table 2:*** Comparison of on-campus cost-of-living (COL; averaged across NS), estimated costs of off-campus living (area of province with highest living costs) and government estimates for off-campus cost-of-living.

# Student Financial Aid Overview

Postsecondary students cover their educational costs using a range of sources, with the most commonly cited including parental contributions, employment income, and government student financial assistance. Though the mechanisms of federal and provincial assistance programs are relatively transparent (and will be discussed shortly), another important source of funding is institutional scholarships and bursaries.

## Government Contributions Prior to Study

Government postsecondary initiatives prior to postsecondary education are primarily focused on early investment strategies. It is easy to understand that early investments in education – specifically Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs) will aid in making PSE more affordable. It is less evident whether or not accessing early investment programs are increasing educational aspirations for the students who benefit from them. It is important to determine whether these incentives hold any power in attitudinal change beyond financial change.

The primary program designed to facilitate this investment is the Canada Education Savings Grant (CESG) [64]. Eligibility for this program is determined by having opened a RESP account, an investment vehicle created to incentivize parents to invest in their child's future education.[65]. However, ***RESPs are simply not a feasible option for low-income families living paycheque to paycheque.*** An offshoot of the CESG specifically designed for these families is the Canada Learning Bond (CLB). The CLB does not require any contributions to a RESP; eligible families apply for the program after opening an account and the government will then contribute a small amount of funding yearly until the beneficiary turns fifteen[66].

**CONCERN**

RESPs are not a feasible financial commitment for many families with low financial resources and other liquidity constraints.

This program is significant for the many families who may be unable to commit to regular RESP contributions. However, registration is not automatic and requires an application process that is not widely publicised. It is a retroactive program, allowing families to access contributions for past years; however, this is a poorly advertised element of the initiative. This ***lack of awareness presents a barrier in assessing the impact of early investment vehicles on uptake and future postsecondary enrolment.*** Despite promotional efforts at a national level, key deterrents to uptake for programs such as the CESG include low awareness, low financial literacy and poor past experiences with financial institutions. All of these barriers are exacerbated for low-income families (which in many cases, see significant overlap with families from other marginalised backgrounds)[67].

**CONCERN**

Lack of awareness presents a barrier in assessing the impact of early investment vehicles on uptake and future postsecondary enrolment.

Of the Nova Scotian children eligible for the CESP in 2021, 44.7% had received a CESG and 33.2% had received a CLB[68]. Both these figures are approximately 10 percentage points below the national rates (55.1% and 42.6% respectively)[69]. Though uptake rates and payments have increased for low- and middle- income families (constituting 40% of CESG beneficiaries in 2021) higher income families' contributions remained consistently higher overall[70]. This emphasises how despite measures to support low-income families, ***"education savings" programs disproportionately benefit those from wealthy backgrounds.***

**CONCERN**

The CESP disproportionately benefits those from wealthy, educated backgrounds and may not play a significant role in causally influencing PSE aspirations.

## Assessing Need

The student loan system in Canada is complex; there are a number of factors involved in determining exactly how much aid each student will receive and what portion of that money must be repaid. Nova Scotia students who qualify for student loans first receive financial assistance in the form of federal contributions through the Canada Student Financial Assistance (CSFA), alongside provincial contributions through the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program (NSSAP)[71]. These contributions are a combination of loans and non-repayable grants.

Assessed need represents the gap between total need and available resources. Once this need has been calculated, it is met with a maximum amount by a combination of federal and provincial grants and loans. In Nova Scotia, students apply for federal and provincial assistance simultaneously through their provincial loan application. The Nova Scotian SFA application is one of the first to open each year, and the process of determining the amount of aid a student is eligible for in Nova Scotia was rated as the least complex of all Canadian provinces in a 2014 report[72].

Both the CFSA and the NSSAP assess a student's available resources by considering the following sources: parental income (dependent-students only), spousal income (married/common-law students only), RESPs or other investments, pensions, employment insurance or income assistance amounts, funding/allowances from other organisations[73].

Additionally, for the CSFA, a fixed student contribution between $1,500 - $3,000 is expected per school year[74]. The amount of this contribution is determined based on family income thresholds. This can prove challenging for a large number of students who are dependent by definition but may not have any financial reliance upon their parents.

Moreover, to calculate expected student contributions the NSSAP utilises a pre-study report that determines earnings throughout the period prior to study. The duration of this period varies depending on the type of student (8 weeks for students graduating high school, 18 weeks for university students, 13 weeks for NSCC students)[75]. Scholarships and bursaries awarded to the student over and above an initial $1,800 exemption are also included within these contributions[76].

Further, for students who choose to work while going to school, in-study earnings are also considered for their student contribution. Any amount earned over $100 per week will be considered as a financial resource; this equates to approximately 7.5 hours of work weekly if earning minimum wage ($13.60 as of October 2022)[77]. Many students must work part-time to cover unmet need due to inadequate government funding. ***The fact that any hours worked beyond this $100 maximum will be considered additional contributions may increase the number of students receiving insufficient assistance as costs continue to rise.***

**CONCERN**

Counting in-study work earnings as contributions when assessing financial need may increase the number of students receiving insufficient assistance as costs continue to rise.

## Canada Student Grants and Loans

Canada Student Grants (CSGs) are non-repayable government contributions available for students from low- and middle-income families. Prior to the pandemic, eligible full-time students received $3,000 with additional allocations for students with dependents. The government of Canada has also recognized the financial burden students with disabilities face and provides additional CSGs for those with permanent and persistent or prolonged impairments. Prior to the pandemic the CSG for Students with Disabilities provided up to $2,000, as well an additional $20,000 for services and equipment for accessibility needs.

In response to the pandemic, the federal government doubled the maximum amount of all CSGs in 2021 from $3,000 to $6,000 until the end of July 2023. Under the doubling, full-time students were eligible for up to $6,000 per academic year ($3,600 for part-time students; $3,200 per dependent; and students with disabilities receive $4,000). According to CSFA, in the first year of the doubling “approximately 542,000 students benefited from $3.2 billion in non-repayable Canada Student Grants”.

Though full-time grants were set to return to $3,000 in 2023, the 2023-24 Budget reduced the grants by $1,800 to $4,200 as per earlier campaign promise.. It concurrently announced increases of $90 to weekly maximum loan allowances. Though this loan increase offset the impacts of the grant reduction, it will result in increased student debt levels as students take on additional repayable aid in place of non-repayable grants.

However, the longevity of these changes is unclear, as the budget also committed to “develop a long-term approach to student financial assistance, in time for budget 2024”. Student engagement at both the federal and provincial level as this review is undertaken will be integral in solidifying a sustainable, student-centred approach to financial aid moving forward.

## Nova Scotia Student Grants and Loans

If a student receives a Nova Scotia Student Loan, it means their assessed need exceeded the maximum contributions possible on a federal level[78]. The NSSAP will provide these students with a Nova Scotia Student Loan (NSSL) of up to $200 per week of study[79]. All Nova Scotia students accessing financial assistance for study within the province will also be eligible for a Nova Scotia Student Grant. The grant is essentially the conversion of 40% of the student's NSSL into an upfront, non-repayable grant; the higher the student's assessed need, the higher the grant[80]. Although this conversion was previously applied to all Nova Scotians, it now only applies to those who choose to study within their home province[81]. Therefore, out-of-province students receive all provincial student assistance as a loan without a non-repayable portion.

Additionally, in 2020 the provincial government acknowledged the increased costs related to PSE during the pandemic in providing a one-time non-repayable COVID-19 Response grant of $750 for NSSAP recipients[82]. Likewise, in 2022, they provided a additional non-repayable grant of $875 recognising the continued financial pressures upon students as a result of the ongoing pandemic[83].

| YEAR | NSSAP Improvements |
|---|---|
| **Fiscal 2022/23** | Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP) - Increased repayment threshold from $25,000 to $40,000. Eligible borrowers can apply to pause repayment of provincial student loans if their earnings fall under $40,000 per year.<br><br>Expanded the definition of permanent disability to include persistent and prolonged disabilities. |
| **Fiscal 2019/20** | Loan Forgiveness – Eliminated the $28,560 debt threshold to qualify. Eligible students will have 100% of their NS Loan forgiven.<br><br>Phase Out of the 40% Upfront Grant for students studying out of Province effective August 1, 2019. Students currently studying outside of Nova Scotia will continue to receive the 40% grant until completion of their current program. |
| **Fiscal 2018/19** | Implemented Dual Needs Assessment for Provincial and Federal Assistance |
| **Fiscal 2017/18** | Weekly Assistance increased from $180 to $200 with the upfront grant remaining at 40%.<br><br>Extended Loan Forgiveness to 5 years for students graduating after August 1, 2017, includes students who are in a Co-op, internship, etc. |

***Table 3:*** Improvements to Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program, 2017-18 – 2022-23. Excerpt from informational handout, Student Financial Assistance Office.

## Financial Support Programs for Indigenous Students

While social barriers relating to Indigenous students have been already been discussed in the first instalment of this paper, examining financial programs for these students is crucial as financial resources represent significant challenge with approximately 1 in 5 Indigenous people living in a low-income household in 2021[84].

The Postsecondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) is a federal initiative providing financial assistance to eligible First Nations postsecondary students[85]. Through the PSSSP, funding is disbursed to councils or bands, who must then determine how to allocate these funds in accordance with program guidelines; Eligible costs that can be covered by the program include tuition, books, travel support, and living allowances[86]. First Nations are allowed to award full-time students up to $53,000 per year through the program[87]. Further, the PSSSP limits student eligibility based on registered "Indian status" recognised by the federal government's Indian Act.

Akin to the PSSSP, the Inuit Postsecondary Education Strategy (IPSES) is a federal initiative which provides targeted financial assistance to Inuit students[88]; The IPSES provides funding to Inuit organisations who are eligible in accordance with land-claim agreements. These organisations then decide mechanisms for distribution, including maximum amounts provided[89]. Direct postsecondary student recipients must be recognised beneficiaries of an Inuit land-claims agreement[90]. Eligible student expenses which may be covered by the program include application fees, tuition, transportation costs, childcare, books and supplies, living expenses, counselling, and more[91].

# Student Financial Assistance Uptake and Unmet Need

## Value of Student Assistance Programs

The median total household income for Nova Scotians in 2020 was $71,500 (more than $12,000 below the national average)[92]. Further, 14.9% of Nova Scotian households were described as low-income (earned at least 50% less than the median national household income) in 2020[93] . Many Nova Scotians lack the upfront resources needed to access postsecondary. For families that may be debt averse, it is important to emphasise that student financial aid would be largely non-repayable, including low- or middle-income CSGs.

Additionally, as stated by CASA, “Grants are not only effective for students, but for every $1 spent on Canada Student Grants, the federal government receives a $3.50 return. At this rate, there will be a net monetized benefit of roughly $8.7 billion dollars over the next 10 years.”[94]. Given that Nova Scotia’s median household income is below the national average, the return on the government’s investment in CSGs is likely higher in this province.

## Gaps in Student Financial Aid Access

One national post-study survey indicated that a quarter of students accessing government SFA do not find the funding adequate to meet their financial need during their studies[95]. Of the total number of NS students (17,979) accessing SFA in 2021-22, 9,962 received assistance at a provincial level, meaning that only 44.6% of students accessing SFA had their need met through federal contributions without requiring additional aid[96]. The total amount of aid dispensed through the NSSAP in 2021-22 was $51,023,859[97]. Divided among the total number of recipients receiving provincial aid, this equates to an average of $5,121.85 per eligible student. Due to the provincial loan-grant conversion process, over 15 million dollars of this total aid was provided as grants.
The overall number of NS students studying at a university, college or other private institution in any province who have received provincial or federal assistance has been decreasing in recent years. The number of students accessing financial assistance decreased by 13.5% between 2019-20 and 2021-22[98]. This trend is likely due to the temporary CSG doubling, meaning that less

students have financial need that exceeds CFSA funding allotments. Further, 80% of those students accessing financial assistance for the 2021-22 academic year were studying at PSIs in Nova Scotia[99]. Overall, of the 22,119 full- and part-time Nova Scotian students enrolled in a university in their home province in the 2021-22 academic year, 36% were receiving provincial student assistance[100]. Furthermore, of the 10,101 students enrolled in NSCC in the 2021-22 academic year 13.7% were receiving provincial student assistance[101].

**Distribution of NS Student Assistance (# of Students)**

| Academic Year | Student Origin | Family Income | PSI Type | Place of Study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019-20 | Rural 3,099 | < $50K 7,147 | University 8,322 | In NS 9,209 |
| | | $50K - $99K 2,158 | College 2,001 | |
| | Urban 8,445 | $100K - $149,999 1,486 | Private 1,185 | Outside NS 2,315 |
| | | $150K + 739 | | |
| 2020-21 | Rural 3,035 | < $50K 4,827 | University 5,403 | In NS 5,847 |
| | | $50K - $99,999 1,285 | College 878 | |
| | Urban 4,438 | $100K - $149,999 955 | Private 1,178 | Outside NS 1,627 |
| | | $150K + 419 | | |
| 2021-22 | Rural 2,602 | < $50K 5,623 | University 7,132 | In NS 7,968 |
| | | $50K - $99,999 2,034 | College 1,386 | |
| | Urban 7,391 | $100K - $149,999 1,470 | Private 1,433 | Outside NS 1,996 |
| | | $150K + 855 | | |

***Table 4:*** NSSAP access by geographic origin, family income, PSI type, place of study, and academic year.

Total students receiving NS SFA: 2019-20 = 11,516; 2020-21 = 7,468 (8,205 when COVID grants are included); 2021-22 = 9,962.

## Gaps in Student Financial Aid Access - Social Determinants

Of the total provincial borrowers in the 2021-22 academic year, approximately 26% were from rural areas, with the vast majority living in urban areas[102]. The fact that nearly half of Nova Scotians live in rural areas suggests that borrowers are disproportionately skewed to urban areas. Whether this reflects a decreased likelihood of rural students to borrow, or demonstrates their disproportionate absence from PSIs, this further emphasises that rural students are not as engaged in PSE as they have the potential to be – especially at the university level.

Further, when it comes to accessing SFA, low-income students – students receiving low-income CSGs – represent approximately half of all applicants over the past few years[103]. This is a relatively large proportion, but it is challenging to accurately determine how these figures compare to the total number of low-income students at PSIs in Nova Scotia. This data is not consistently collected in order to be easily comparable across institutions. It does seem that many of the students who choose to access financial aid come from low-income backgrounds which is promising, but these numbers cannot reflect the low-income students not accessing aid, or the low-income students not accessing PSE at all. It is also unlikely that students will decide to access PSE based solely on the financial incentives available to them, so those low-income students who chose to access SFA were those who had already decided to attend PSE. ***Although a valuable tool in supplementing the resources of students with high need, financial assistance is only one part of the equation.***

Students with disabilities represented 8% of those receiving financial assistance in 2020-2021[104]. Proof of disability is required to receive SFA which could include a medical certificate, psychoeducational assessment, or documents proving you have previously accessed permanent disability assistance. Many students continue to face barriers in accessing and funding psychoeducational assessments. ***Though the province provides a retroactive bursary for student loan recipients ultimately diagnosed with a disability, this bursary does not cover the entire cost of the assessment, nor account for the often-significant wait times associated with the assessment itself.*** Furthermore, psychoeducational assessments are not included as an option for reimbursement, despite Accessibility Centres reporting significant increases related diagnoses.

**CONCERN**

Though the province provides a retroactive bursary for student loan recipients ultimately diagnosed with a disability, this bursary does not cover the entire cost of the assessment, nor account for the often-significant wait times associated with the assessment itself.

Indigenous-specific federal student aid programs limit student eligibility to those with registered “Indian status” (as recognised by the federal government’s Indian Act) or beneficiaries of Inuit land-claim agreements. In 2016, 46% of the self-identified Indigenous population were outside these groups (Metis or other non-status Indigenous peoples)[105]. Thus, ***Indigenous-specific federal student aid programs exclude almost half of the Indigenous population.*** Nonetheless, in many cases the distributed amount is not enough to meet the demand of interested and eligible Indigenous students[106].

**CONCERN**

Though Indigenous students receive financial assistance through the federal PSSSP program, Indigenous students with disabilities must still apply through the CSFAP/NSSAP to unlock accessibility funding, furthering access barriers.

**CONCERN**

Indigenous-specific federal student aid programs exclude almost half of the Indigenous population.

While the federal government has been making investments to expand funding programs, these shortfalls contribute to findings that many Indigenous students are forced to wait longer to access

PSE. Provincially, 5.8% of Nova Scotians (a total of 52,430 individuals) self-identified as Indigenous in the 2021 Canadian Census[107]. If the trends observed on a national level are mirrored provincially, many of these youth may not be able to access financial assistance, and consequently, PSE. An exploration of financial contributions for Indigenous students at a provincial level could prove valuable in increasing the engagement and persistence of Indigenous students at the postsecondary level. This could include an upfront provincial grant for Indigenous youth accessing PSE in their home province.

## Unmet Need

A serious concern facing many postsecondary students today is unmet need, which occurs when the resources available to fund one's education are smaller than the actual costs. This unmet need could be due to an inaccurate systemic calculation of one's resources, which can often be resolved in consultation with the SFA office. However, unmet need more typically stems from reaching the maximum assistance amounts available and still having residual assessed needs that cannot be met through these methods. For the former issue, the Student Financial Assistance Appeal Board exists. This board resolves discrepancies between assessed and actual need caused by extenuating circumstances not considered by the universal calculation system[108]. In this case, unmet need reflects inconsistencies between the system and reality, and could in many ways be remedied by a greater awareness of the appeals process.

More troubling is the second reason students face unmet need after accessing SFA. Using the federal and provincial weekly maximums previously discussed, the most a student can receive through the combined student loan programs (excluding Canada Student Grants) is $410 on a weekly basis. Most university study periods are 34 weeks long (39 weeks for most NSCC programs)[109]; if a student qualifies for the maximum federal and provincial loan amounts for their academic year, this would equate to $13,940 per year for university and $15,990 per year for NSCC. These numbers are likely larger in reality, as those who have significant amounts of need are more likely to qualify for CSG's above and beyond loan maximums. An alarming proportion of students grapple with unmet need each year, due to costs that are greater than what student loans can cover. This is largely due to consistent increases in tuition, ancillary fees, and living costs (particularly residence and meal plans) not necessarily reflected in increasing available contributions.

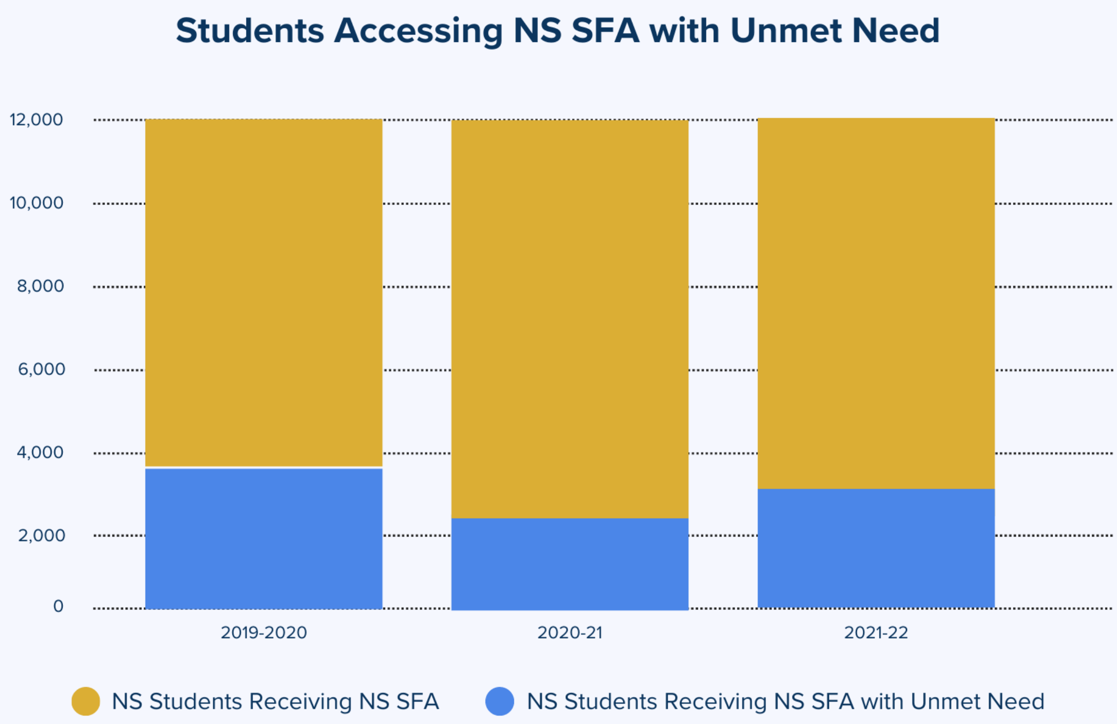



***Figure 2:*** Proportion of NS students accessing NSSAP and facing unmet need.

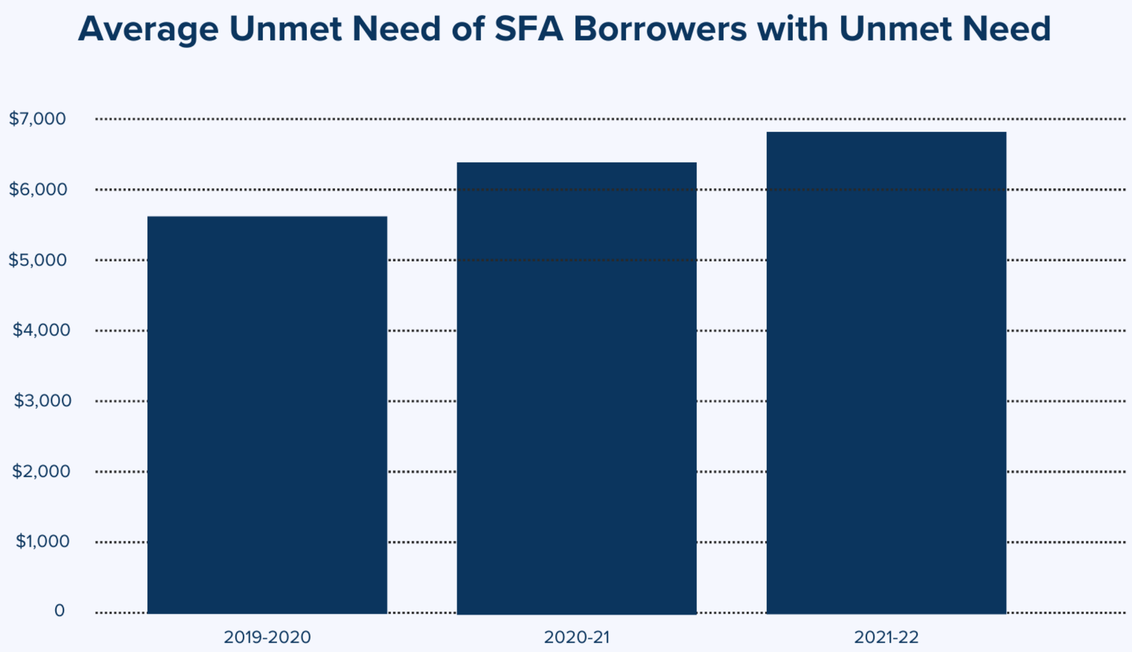



***Figure 3:*** Avg. value of unmet need for students with need exceeding NSSAP maximums.

Of the students accessing SFA in the 2021-22 academic year, an alarming 17.3% faced assessed need beyond federal and provincial program maximums[110]. Although this number decreased 3-percentage points from 2019-20, prior to the temporary federal CSG doubling, ***nearly one in five students seeking financial assistance still had calculated needs beyond program maximums.*** Even more concerning is the amount of unmet need many students face: of the students who had calculated need exceeding SFA program maximums in the 2021 academic year, the average amount of need left unmet was $6,870[111]. This amount represents over half the cost of university tuition fees and is certainly significant enough to deter those without other financing options from pursuing PSE. These statistics paint a concerning picture for students with high financial need. Although the proportion of students accessing SFA and facing unmet need decreased over a three-year period, the average unmet need of those students increased by 24% over the same period. ***Fewer students accessing SFA face unmet need, but those who do have greater unmet need.***

**CONCERN**

Despite the temporary doubling of the Canada Student Grant program, a significant proportion of Nova Scotia student assistance borrowers continue to grapple with high levels of unmet need (nearly 1 in 5 in 2021-22). Although a decreasing number of those accessing SFA are affected by unmet need, those who do face higher dollar amounts.

As the costs associated with education continue to steadily increase, it seems unlikely that this decrease in the number of students affected by unmet need is due to an actual increase in the affordability of education. It may suggest either that more students' need is being met by the temporary CSG doubling or that students seeking SFA are increasingly those with a lower initial level of need (from higher-income families with more discretionary income). This may signify lower overall engagement of students with high financial need at a postsecondary level, in part due to the challenges of enrolment and persistence while facing prohibitive upfront costs.

It seems that students with an unmet level of need may be becoming less represented among those accessing SFA, while the amount of unmet need for those who do face need in excess of maximums increases. It seems likely this also mirrored to some extent in the portion of students not accessing SFA. ***This suggests that those facing increased unmet need may be***

***increasingly under- represented among those accessing PSE in Nova Scotia.*** This could be viewed as a failure to adequately correlate financial assistance maximums with the increasing needs of students as well as a reflection of the overly inflated and exponentially rising costs associated with PSE.

**CONCERN**

Those facing increased unmet need may be increasingly under- represented among those accessing PSE in Nova Scotia.

## Unmet Need – COVID Context

A report from CASA, found that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly worsened PSE affordability for the majority of students which affected the way they funded their education[112]. Many low- and middle-income students have cited the temporary CSG doubling as critical in allowing them to continue to access postsecondary over the past two years[113]. Students who rely on CSGs and continue to study in Fall 2023 will face upwards of a 50% cut to their non-repayable financial aid. These students will be forced to take on increased loans and may be required to look elsewhere for resources if their need exceeds loan program maximums. Further, despite the doubling ending in 2023, the negative financial impacts of the pandemic continue to persist. In 2022, the annual inflation rate rose to 6.8%, a 40-year high for Canada[114]. ***The federal reversion of grants to pre-pandemic funding levels, as costs of living and postsecondary continue to climb, will increase the unmet need faced by students.***

**CONCERN**

The federal reversion of CSGs to pre-pandemic funding levels, as costs of living and postsecondary continue to climb, will increase the unmet need faced by students.

## Solutions to Unmet Need

For students with unmet need, multiple solutions have been proposed to supplement gaps in resources[115]. However, many of these potential avenues are not without their own areas of concern. One suggestion is seeking increased parental contributions, or contributions from RESPs. Those students with unmet need are more likely those from low- or middle-income families with higher need, and as such simply requesting parental contributions may not be possible. As previously discussed, RESPs and other investments must be invested well in advance of someone's decision to access PSE, and thus are not a reasonable way to combat unmet need.

Scholarships and bursaries are also a valuable option for some – emphasis is placed on the fact that it is not necessary to be a student to qualify for some grants and scholarships. However, many of the scholarships that are not linked to academic merit place value instead on community engagement efforts, and for students from low-income, rural or otherwise underrepresented families, these opportunities for "resume-boosting" may not be possible. This is especially problematic for the students who must focus on contributing financially to their families and do not have time for volunteering, even if such opportunities were available (which they often are not in many rural communities).

Total amounts and criterion for distribution are difficult to quantify for institutional scholarships and bursaries, given the variation across campuses. Many campuses skew heavily towards merit-based funding, with fewer needs-based supports available. Students attending postsecondary institutions will also often experience a drop in academic performance in the transition and may be likely to lose the entrance scholarships they initially receive[116]. ***Thus, institutional merit-based incentives only get students of a specific group through the door and do little for retention and incentivization for other underrepresented groups.***

**CONCERN**

Many student scholarships intended to be renewable over the course of their degree function mainly to invite students to enrol but can be retained year-over-year only if students maintain a certain academic average.

Another way in which students are encouraged to combat unmet need is through increasing their study-period earnings by adopting a part-time job while obtaining a PSE. As previously discussed, earnings over a $100/week threshold will be counted towards a student contribution. Even more concerning for those who face already augmented costs in comparison with their domestic counterparts: international students. As well as being ineligible for financial assistance from the

Nova Scotian and Canadian governments, international students are subject to limitations on accessing off campus work[117].

Until recently international students were not permitted to work more than 20 hours per week in Nova Scotia[118]. This policy sparked significant controversy nation-wide, as many students turned to less legitimate means of work in order to meet the financial requirements of their degree[119]. Temporary public policy has lifted these restrictions (subject to meeting provided requirements) until Dec 31st 2023, however this leaves many international students uncertain over how they will finance their education after this time[120].

***Working while attending school may not be possible for those juggling a full-time course load;*** as a result, many students instead become part-time students to combat the seemingly unattainable costs of full-time education. As a result, their degree will take a longer time to complete and they will be less likely to receive the full benefit of programs available to full-time students who complete their degree in a more condensed period of time, such as Loan Forgiveness.

A final method proposed to finance one's education when facing unmet need is through bank loans or personal lines of credit. Some financial institutions have programs in place particularly for postsecondary students looking to fund their education[121]. The challenge associated with this option is mainly related to interest rates; though some may have low interest rates, this interest is often applied immediately. In contrast, interest on student loans does not begin accumulating until six months after the end of a student's study period. These private loans often require a co-signer, which can be difficult for families who may not have good credit or otherwise struggle financially. Also, unlike government loans with the potential of loan forgiveness or repayment assistance plans, these private loans offer little to no assistance in repayment if required. These types of loans are much higher-risk than student loans, but many students still choose to access them.

In a survey of the borrowing trends of Maritime university graduates in 2014, 42% had cited borrowing from government student loan sources, whereas 19% borrowed from banks or financial institutions[122] . Although it is difficult to determine why these students borrowed from financial institutions instead of through government student assistance it is likely that low awareness of available SFA programming played some role in choosing not to access these incentives.

In order to maintain a PSE system that is truly accessible to all, more needs to be done to address the prevalence of unmet need and its implications on student success. ***The lack of research into the demographics most affected by unmet need makes the proposal of effective solutions to the problem of unmet need challenging, but it seems evident that the students most affected would most likely be those from families with lower income levels.*** Those from low-income families are also more likely to face additional demographic barriers in accessing PSE, which further emphasises the value that increasing targeted upfront grants for students from marginalised groups could have in addressing unmet need and increasing access rates.

The issue with placing sole emphasis upon retroactive financial supports such as loan forgiveness and educational tax credits is that the promise of future compensation or debt relief does nothing to meet upfront resource gaps at the outset of one's degree. Many students may not be able to pursue their program to completion due to unmet need, making them even less likely to benefit from these back-end incentives. Further, it is likely that those not struggling with unmet need have higher financial stability, and by extension, were less likely to require these incentives in the first place. Thus, retroactive incentives may disproportionately benefit those whose needs have already been met. The ideal way to empower those with unmet need is through the implementation of targeted upfront grants to cover resource gaps. This would require an examination of particular demographic backgrounds that may be more likely to feel the effects of this lack of sufficient resources.

**CONCERN**

Retroactive programming such as loan forgiveness and tax credits do nothing to combat unmet need and upfront barriers in educational funding.

As well, an analysis of the adequacy of loan maximums and allocations at both the provincial and federal level seems prudent: increasing the CSFA and NSSAP weekly maximums could be a huge step towards limiting the barriers posed by unmet need. Especially as the cost of living and the cost of education increase year-to-year, it seems only logical that associated weekly maximums and allocations for housing and living should be transparently assessed and increased on a yearly basis to reflect rising expenditures. Alternatively, costs could be indexed to reflect increases in inflation. Further, housing and living allocations must be community-specific as this affects the costs students will face throughout their degree. Currently associated data on these costs is skewed towards major urban areas and not reflective of the local realities for students.

It should be noted it would be nearly impossible to fully cover unmet need using program maximum increases alone. Indeed, 3,111 NS students faced unmet need in 2021-22[123]; with an average unmet need amount of $6,851 this equated to an estimated total unmet need of

$21,313,461. However, ***any*** increase would have a positive impact in both dispelling some level of unmet need and increasing the financial accessibility of attending university in Nova Scotia.

***Increased research into unmet need will be crucial*** - it seems likely that at a certain point of unmet need, the gap in resources will be perceived as so prohibitive there seems to be no reason to even explore other sources of income to supplement this gap. No doubt this threshold will differ from person to person but determining how the amount of unmet need influences an individual's likelihood of pursuing PSE is highly valuable to future programming.

**CONCERN**

The lack of research into the demographics most affected by unmet need makes the proposal of effective solutions to the problem of unmet need challenging, but it seems evident that the students most affected would most likely be those from families with lower income levels.

## Promotion of Student Financial Assistance Programs

The role of financial assistance in encouraging PSE aspirations is not clear-cut, as it has been established that most students will not consider financial barriers unless they already aspire to some level of postsecondary education. Various misperceptions exist about the cost of PSE, and about the availability of programs to supplement these costs. ***Studies have shown that most students overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits of PSE, and that these tendencies are greater among students from a low-income family background***[124].

**CONCERN**

Studies have shown that most students overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits of PSE, and that these tendencies are greater among students from a low-income family background.

Simply showing a video on the benefits of postsecondary education and a discussion of financial assistance with low-income students led those students to report higher expectations of earnings following PSE completion, as well as a decrease in concerns around cost and increased aspirations to access some kind of PSE. This change was especially notable among those who first reported no aspirations for such programs[125]. This emphasises the need for increased promotion of financial aid programming at a high school level to combat these misconceptions and lack of adequate information on PSE affordability.

The report of the Nova Scotia Education and Early Childhood Development Transition Task Force included recommendations emphasising the value of early intervention when it comes to financial planning for education. They recommended reaching students and parents with financial planning information earlier, beginning with information parents receive when their child is born, and branching out to included it in early year programs[126]. A MPHEC study on the experience of 2018 university graduates highlights the importance of early intervention strategies as "overall, the less graduates [needed to borrow] to finance their 2018 degree and further education, the more likely they were to value the financial investment they made in their university education."[127].

First generation students who do not identify student loans as a viable way to finance their degree are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to accessing postsecondary education[128]. Many students may believe they would not be eligible for SFA, when in reality students across a wide variety of income levels and backgrounds can benefit from these programs. Many families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, may face debt aversion and attempt to avoid relying on loans to finance their education[129]. This emphasises a potentially increased likelihood of loan and debt aversion among groups already less likely to access PSE due to social factors. Working to dispel these misperceptions through promotional campaigns to raise awareness in early high school years will be crucial in improving SFA access.

It is important to note that needs-based grants have not been found to systematically increase enrolment unless they cover unmet need or require an early commitment, but they do consistently improve completion rates for disadvantaged students. Once enrolled in a PSI, financial aid becomes much more valuable in encouraging persistence to graduation[130]. These findings are echoed in an American study that determined financial aid influences the likelihood of attaining a postsecondary degree in six years for all students except those from high-income families. For low-income students, needs based grants increased chances of graduation (regardless of grant source) whereas loans that required repayment lowered this likelihood significantly[131]. In comparison, merit-based aid can hold negative effects for disadvantaged students[132], emphasising further the need for a move away from this type of assistance to a needs-based model.

**CONCERN**

Institutional merit-based incentives only get students of a specific group through the door and do little for retention and incentivization for other underrepresented groups.

The case for increasing targeted upfront grants for first-generation and otherwise underrepresented students is a compelling one. As educational costs increase and students struggle with high levels of unmet need, identifying a method to target aid towards those with highest need is crucial. Combining informational programming on PSE and SFA at a secondary level with targeted financial aid for first-generation students could be invaluable in increasing postsecondary aspirations, particularly as first-generation students are often more likely to identify with other underrepresented groups.

# Government Contributions After Study

As noted in a global analysis of targeted free tuition, "one peculiarity of the Canadian student aid system … has been the prevalence of back-end financial aid instruments"[133]. There is an extensive focus on programming to support students retroactively, both upon completion of each academic year through tax credits and at the end of their degree, through various programs including the Loan Forgiveness program for all Nova Scotia students studying in Nova Scotia.

## Loan Forgiveness

Previously, eligibility for loan forgiveness in Nova Scotia required students to meet a certain debt threshold of $28,560; the revised Loan Forgiveness program grants all Nova Scotia students studying in Nova Scotia who graduate after August 1, 2019, 100% forgiveness on the provincial portion of their student loan[134]. This forgiveness applies to the first 5 years of a student's first (undergraduate) degree; any study time beyond this will not be eligible for the program except for students with permanent disabilities, who may be studying at 40-60% of a full course-load and are eligible for up to 10 years of loan forgiveness. This program is funded by the phase-out of the 40% upfront loan-to-grant conversion for students who choose to study outside the province in programs that are available in Nova Scotia. This lack of conversion and loan forgiveness for students studying out of province could prove a valuable incentive for students to stay in Nova Scotia to study, but only if it is widely promoted.

Through the previous incarnations of the debt cap and loan forgiveness programs, 8.6 million dollars was awarded to 2,124 students (an average of 5,429 per student) in the 2021-22 academic year[135]. ***This program certainly serves to benefit those who persist to graduation but does little to encourage upfront enrolment and does nothing to combat unmet need*** – arguably the most significant financial barrier facing students today.

As we have already discussed, that needs-based funding will increase persistence of students once enrolled in PSE, the challenge is still in developing upfront programming and not in retroactive incentives. However, this is a promising step towards preparing students for the workforce with lower debt levels, although students will still face significant debt on a federal level (to receive provincial funding students must have already received the maximum amount from the CSFA).

## Repayment Assistance

Nova Scotia's 0% interest program supports students after study with loan repayment, who stay in or come back to live in the province, by exempting them from any level of interest on their Nova Scotia student loan[136]. This program is available to students who have not had their loan forgiven.

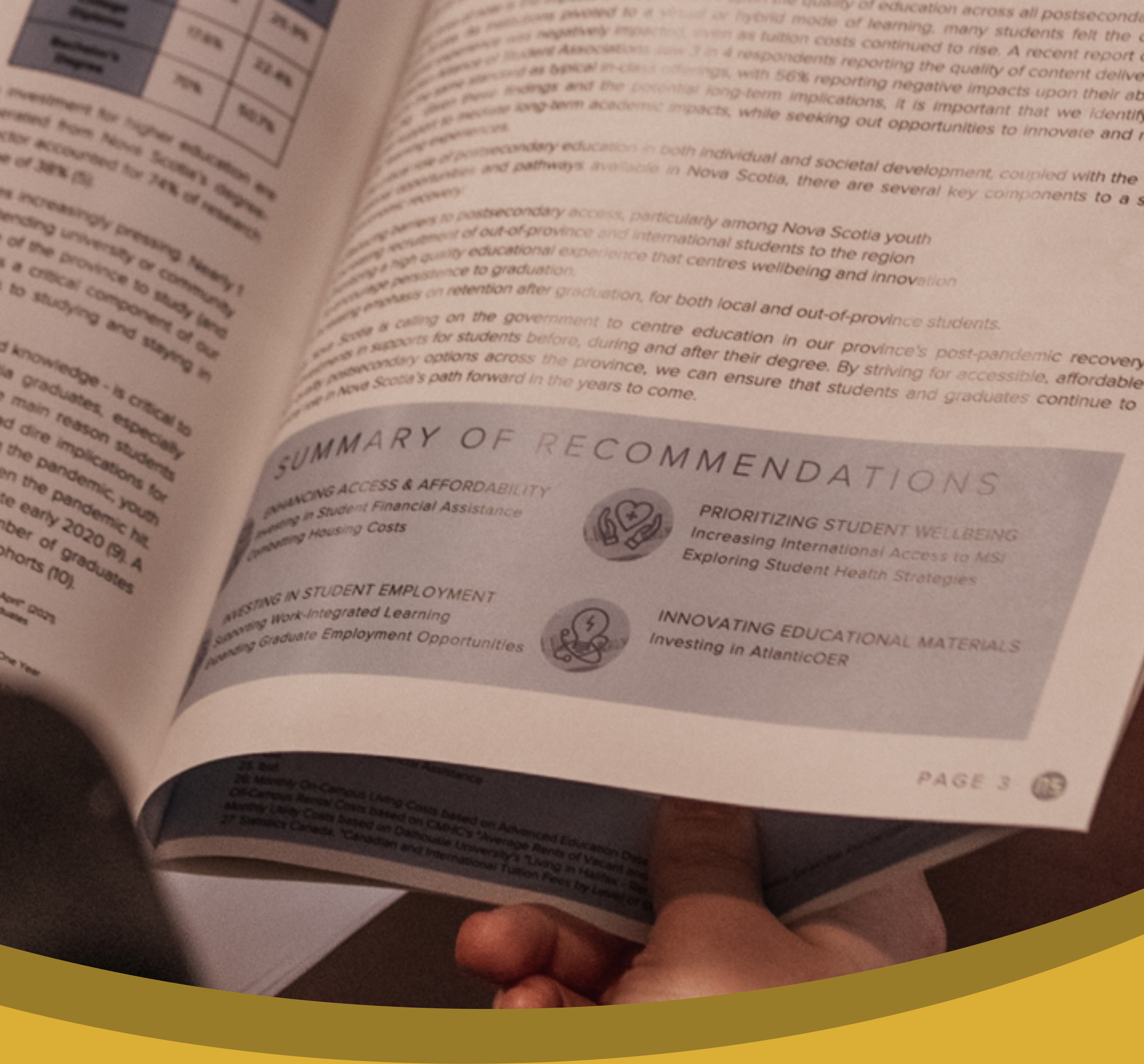
Additionally, borrowers can apply, based on their household income, for Repayment Assistance Plans (RAP) to reduce or pause repayments for a six-month period[137]. Following study, single borrowers who apply and are earning less than $40,000 a year will not have to back any portion of their federal or provincial loan during the approved 6-month period[138]. What's more, during the RAP period the Government of Canada will cover all monthly interest not covered by any reduced payments for 60 months or until the borrower is 10 years out of school. Following that time, the government will cover any monthly interest or principal amounts not covered by reduced payments for those still on the RAP. Generally, borrowers have up to 114 months (9.5 years) to repay both their provincial and federal loans, however repayment assistance may extend this period up to a maximum of 174 months (14.5 years)[139].

## Tax Credits

Education tax credits are non-refundable reimbursements automatically available to eligible postsecondary students upon the filing of their income tax following each academic year. These programs pose many concerns when it comes to overall effectiveness and were reported to have "negligible causal effects" [140]. The timing of the reimbursement – a significant length of time after the initial investment – ensures that these credits do nothing to cover unmet need or upfront liquidity constraints. A global literature review found that education tax credits were likely to have no positive impact for disadvantaged students and disproportionately benefited those from families who already had an inflated level of financial capital[141]. The investments currently made in these programs could be instead invested in developing better infrastructure supporting high-needs and underrepresented students in the form of targeted, non-repayable needs-based grants.

**CONCERN**

Education Tax Credits are an inefficient reimbursement method that disproportionately benefits the upper class while doing nothing to ease upfront financial challenges.




# Policy Resolutions

## The Costs of Postsecondary Education

### <u>Tuition Regulation</u>

*CONCERN: Domestic university tuition within NS is the highest in the country, 36.5% over the national average. It is also increasing at a much faster rate than the federal average.*

- Over the past six years, average domestic undergraduate tuition in Canada has increased 3.2% (to $6,834 in 2023); over the same period in Nova Scotia, average university tuition fees rose 20% to $9,328. Average tuition fees for a Nova Scotia undergraduate are the highest in the country, at 36.5% above the national average.

**Recommendation #1**

Domestic tuition should be regulated to a maximum 1% annual increase throughout the duration of the next iteration of the Memorandum of Understanding, alongside proportional increases in university funding to reverse the overemphasis on student contributions in funding levels.

*CONCERN: International students face costs that are significantly inflated, and that will continue to rise exponentially year over year as revenue available from NS students becomes more regulated and domestic enrollment stagnates.*

*CONCERN: The lack of tuition regulation for international students causes them to face highly unpredictable and minimally transparent tuition increases year-over-year, with none of the corresponding upfront financial aid provided to their domestic peers.*

*CONCERN: Though it increases predictability, the cohort-based model does little to lessen the upfront financial barriers international students face in accessing PSE. Further, without government regulations on international student tuition, the introduction of a cohort model can be used by PSIs to make large one-time tuition increases appear more palatable.*

**Recommendation #2**

Though universities should implement cohort models of tuition as a best practice for their international populations, regulations should be put in place to limit maximum year-over-year increases for incoming cohorts.

*CONCERN: Though created as a mechanism to bring Nova Scotia domestic tuition in line with the national average, the NS University Student Bursary is not indexed to inflation or tuition increases, thus representing a smaller proportion of tuition with each yearly increase in student fees. Further, the bursary systematically excludes college recipients.*

**Recommendation #3**

The NS University Student Bursary should be updated yearly to reflect university tuition increases (3% per year) and cost-of-living, ensuring it does not represent an increasingly smaller proportion of total education costs with time. Alternatively, a portion of the bursary should be reallocated to modernise Student Financial Assistance maximums, better targeting college and university students in greatest financial need.

*CONCERN: In the current fee model, university students are unable to precisely quantify the tuition fees they will pay over the course of their degree (beyond the current academic year). Releasing fees on a single-year basis only months before the start of the subsequent year minimises long-term fee predictability for international and domestic students alike.*

- The 2019-2024 MOU regulated that fee schedules for the upcoming academic year be submitted to the province no later than April 30th each year, yet there is no requirement for when fee schedules must be shared with students. The timing of this deadline means that students have no way of knowing the true costs of their next year of study until they have already completed the previous year. In comparison, NSCC's latest fee schedule release included the costs for the next four academic years, allowing students to know the full costs of their program before enrolment.

*CONCERN: University-provided estimates for student costs typically exclude non-academic expenses, such as living and housing costs.*

**Recommendation #4**

Require the public release of university fee schedules directly following approval by the government. As well, explore opportunities to release tuition projections for several upcoming years simultaneously.

## Government Contributions to Universities

*CONCERN: Government contributions to university operating budgets are currently increasing at a rate below that of inflation, as well as yearly increases to tuition. The proportion of university funding provided by the government decreases with each passing year, with students increasingly relied upon as the primary source of institutional revenue.*

**Recommendation #5**

University operating grants should increase annually at the higher of either the real GDP growth rate or the provincial rate of inflation to reflect the economic context in which these universities exist and make financial decisions. If a fixed increase value is preferred, grants should be set to increase by 5% annually to account for steady increases in institutional expenses and ensure student fees are not used to compensate for growing deficit.

*CONCERN: It can be challenging to quantify institutional progress and accountability on the objectives of the MOU.*

- The 2019-2024 MOU stipulates that government funding is contingent on a the success of universities meeting goals outlined in 'Outcome Agreements'.[142] These agreements "include specific measures that will be taken by the universities to advance their long-term strategies and commitment to quality education, sustainability, and advancement of the priorities of the Province of Nova Scotia.".[143] The mechanisms for these outcomes remain private and confidential from the public, and in general may lack the measuring and reporting specificity to adequately hold these parties accountable to their shared goals.

**Recommendation #6**

Ensure that the outcomes and key indicators associated with the MOU are measurable and clearly defined, allowing for consistent assessment and tracking. The outcome agreements attached to MOU funding should be publicly available to ensure transparency and accountability to student stakeholders.

## Textbooks

***CONCERN:  Although textbooks are crucial to a quality education for many students, the costs associated with these resources are often prohibitive and face low regulation.***

***CONCERN: Though OER repositories have seen significant uptake and savings for students at both institutional and regional levels, there is a lack of consistent buy-in or sustainable funding from government and institutions to promote continued OER expansion and innovation across the province.***

- Several campuses across the province launched faculty grants to support the development of OERs internal to their campuses, while others are working to embed OERs in policy and planning. On a regional basis, StudentsNS supported the Council of Atlantic Academic Librarians (CAAL) in launching a pilot Atlantic-wide repository in 2020. Of the 66 OERs currently on the platform (saving students over $350,000), over 80% are from Nova Scotia. Despite the growing identification of OER as a key step in affordability and innovation, efforts vary significantly campus by campus, and the AtlanticOER project funding is set to sunset at the end of the current fiscal year.

**Recommendation #7**

Support the creation of a provincial OER strategy across all Nova Scotia universities that includes financial and informational supports to aid in creation and promotion of Nova Scotia OERs. Concurrently, commit to sustainable provincial funding of the AtlanticOER repository, ensuring it remains an accessible resource for faculty and students across the province.

## Auxiliary and Ancillary Fees

*CONCERN: Ancillary fees lack predictability and are widely variable across PSIs. There is a lack of transparency in the breakdown of - and review process for - the ancillary fees currently in place, sparking a need for clear, consistent itemization.*

- Institution-to-institution variation in ancillary costs is high, and existing fees are not always easily quantifiable and definable. This is concerning as tuition fees become increasingly regulated; although the 2019-24 MOU stated that ancillary fees could not be increased to cover the revenue that could not be obtained from tuition, it is difficult to determine whether this is the case without detailed allocations to allow comparison with the market costs of these goods and services.

**Recommendation #8**

Require reporting of ancillary fee breakdown and allocation in a consistent manner for all NS universities to ensure increased transparency and to allow comparisons of costs ascribed to the same services across PSIs, including mandatory meal plans.

## Living Costs

*CONCERN: Government cost of living estimates for NS students for student loan calculations are significantly lower than reality for many on- and off-campus students.*

- For the majority of Nova Scotia students, actual costs of living both on- and off-campus are significantly greater than the estimates currently used to determine student financial assistance allocations and the total amount of aid one will receive.

*CONCERN: Increasing housing and living allocations in Student Financial Assistance without concurrently increasing the maximum amount of aid a borrower can receive will do little to address rising levels of unmet need.*

**Recommendation #9**

Student Financial Assistance allocations should be regularly assessed and updated to ensure they accurately reflect the costs of being a student as affordability pressures grow.

## Student Financial Aid Overview

**Government Contributions Prior to Study**

***CONCERN: RESPs are not a feasible financial commitment for many families with low financial resources and other liquidity constraints.***

- The gap in RESP holdings across family backgrounds has largely been attributed to family income as well as parental education. Low-income families may also face additional uptake barriers in the form of lower financial literacy levels and poor past experiences with financial institutions. Although more inclusive than the CESG program, CLB registration is not automatic and requires an application process, which is problematic as many families who would benefit from the program are unaware it exists. This lack of promotion and awareness limits the program's full effectiveness.

***CONCERN: The CESP disproportionately benefits those from wealthy, educated backgrounds and may not play a significant role in causally influencing PSE aspirations.***

**Recommendation #10**

Increase provincial promotion of the CESG, emphasising the value of this program for families from all income levels. Examine the potential for automatic enrolment in the CLB if determined eligible by taxes filed.

***CONCERN: Lack of awareness presents a barrier in assessing the impact of early investment vehicles on uptake and future postsecondary enrolment.***

**Recommendation #11**

Expand supports for SFA program promotion with a focus on dispelling the existing misconceptions through increased discussion of these programs at a higher secondary level. This will help to ensure students' decisions to access PSE are not limited by financial concerns.

## Student Financial Assistance Uptake and Unmet Need

*CONCERN: Counting in-study work earnings as contributions when assessing financial need may increase the number of students receiving insufficient assistance as costs rise.*

*CONCERN: Even prior to the pandemic, Nova Scotia student assistance borrowers grappled with high levels of unmet need (nearly 1 in 5 in 2021-22). Additionally, those who do face unmet need see higher dollar amounts.*

*CONCERN: Those facing increased unmet need may be increasingly under- represented among those accessing PSE in Nova Scotia.*

**Recommendation #12**

With increased investments in federal student maximums and partial maintenance of pandemic increases to Canada Student Grants, the Province should ensure any resulting provincial savings are sustainably invested into permanently increasing program maximums.

*CONCERN: Though Indigenous students receive financial assistance through the federal PSSSP program, Indigenous students with disabilities must still apply through the CSDAP/NSSAP to unlock accessibility funding, furthering access barriers.*

*CONCERN: Indigenous specific federal student aid programs exclude almost half of the Indigenous population.*

**Recommendation #13**

Discuss the addition of increased financial support for Indigenous students at a provincial level to supplement their levels of unmet need and to address the First Nations attainment gap and its prevalence at the university level.

*CONCERN: Though the province provides a retroactive bursary for student loan recipients ultimately diagnosed with a disability, this bursary does not cover the entire cost of assessment, nor account for the often-significant wait times associated with the assessment itself.*

*CONCERN: Many student scholarships intended to be renewable over the course of their degree function mainly to invite students to enrol but can be retained year-over-year only if students maintain a certain academic average.*

- As many students experience a significant drop in grades between high school and the first year of university, these incentives encourage enrolment but do little to improve persistence.

**Recommendation #14**

Work to implement a focus shift from merit-based to needs-based aid in Nova Scotia postsecondary institutions, and advocate for increased emphasis upon internal institutional programming to supplement unmet need.

*CONCERN: Though all students should be allowed equal opportunity to pursue employment of their choosing while in study, international students face additional barriers due to arbitrary work hour maximums (temporarily suspended as of 2022).*

**Recommendation #15**

Advocate for the permanent elimination of the arbitrary regulation allowing a limit of 20 hours of legal work per week for international students studying in Canada.

*CONCERN: Retroactive programming such as loan forgiveness and tax credits do nothing to combat unmet need and upfront gaps in educational funding.*

- As a result, these programs may disproportionately benefit those whose need has been met upfront – those who are struggling less with unmet need.

*CONCERN: The lack of research into the demographics most affected by unmet need makes the proposal of effective solutions to the problem of unmet need challenging, but it seems* *evident that the students most affected would most likely be those from families with lower income levels.*

**Recommendation #16**

Empower groups more likely to face unmet need by implementing targeted upfront grants as part of a larger shift away from retroactive programming. By collecting more precise data on the demographics affected by unmet need, this targeting can maximise the impact of available resources. First-generation students may be the most important demographic to target in increasing access to underrepresented groups.

**Promotion of Student Financial Assistance Programs**

*CONCERN: Studies have shown that most students overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits of PSE, and that these tendencies are greater among students from a low-income family background.*

*CONCERN: Institutional merit-based incentives only get students of a specific group through the door and do little for retention and incentivization for other underrepresented groups.*

- Internal scholarships are often based on academic or co-curricular experiences, benefiting those who have had greater opportunities in these areas - which often has a direct correlation with income levels. Merit-based incentives have been shown to deter low-income students from accessing postsecondary and do little to increase representation of underrepresented groups.

## Government Contributions After Study

**Tax Credits**

*CONCERN: Education Tax Credits are an outdated and inefficient system disproportionately benefiting the upper class while doing nothing to ease upfront financial challenges.*

- Research suggests these credits pose “negligible causal effects”, in large part due to the timing - well after the funds have been spent. A global review found that these credits have no positive impact for disadvantaged students and disproportionately benefits those with lower levels of need.

### Recommendation #17

Repurpose the funds currently invested in tax credits programs towards upfront grant programming to strengthen enrolment incentives and to diminish challenges associated with unmet need.

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students