



FEDERAL PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2025 - 2026

THE McMASTER STUDENTS UNION

1. Food Insecurity

Recommendation 1: The Department of Finance Canada should make the Grocery Rebate a permanent, bi-annual benefit; expanding eligibility to include all low-income postsecondary students including international and part-time students; and creating a student-specific stream within the GST/HST credit system to ensure automatic and equitable access specific stream within the GST/HST credit system to ensure automatic and equitable access.

Food insecurity is a growing concern, particularly among those enrolled in postsecondary education. Among full-time postsecondary students in Canada, 15% report being food insecure, with 16.2% of part time students reporting the same. This means approximately 1 in every 6 post-secondary students in Canada are currently dealing with food insecurity.

These statistics are highly concerning as access to food and adequate nutrition are critical components to one's studies. Food insecurity is linked to dietary compromises, mental health problems, decreases in overall health, and poorer academic achievement among students¹. By ensuring students have access to nutrition, we can begin to eliminate some of these barriers. However, this issue goes beyond only students. Household food insecurity is a recognized as a public health issue in Canada, as it is reported to affect 25.5% of the population in 2024².

Addressing food insecurity in post-secondary students is a crucial issue as education is a social determinant of health. With attainment of higher education correlated with increased health and social advantages³. Food insecurity has also been linked to worsened class and exam attendance; alongside poorer academic performance⁴. We as a society must ensure our students are properly supported in their studies, especially in regard to International and racialized students who experience these difficulties at a higher rate⁵.



¹ Wang, Yichun; Fafard St-Germain, Andr e-Anne; and Tarasuk, Valerie. "Prevalence and Socio-Demographic Correlates of Food Insecurity among Post-Secondary Students and Non-Students of Similar Age in Canada," BMC Public Health, published May 25, 2023, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-023-15756-y>.

² University of Toronto, "New Data on Household Food Insecurity in 2024," PROOF (University of Toronto), accessed August 15, 2025, <https://proof.utoronto.ca/2025/new-data-on-household-food-insecurity-in-2024/>.

³ University of New Brunswick, "Hungry for Solutions: The Rise of Food Insecurity Across Canada and on Our University Campuses," UNB Alumni News, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://www.unb.ca/alumni/news/2025/feature-food-insecurity-in-canada-and-university-cam-puses.html>.

⁴ Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, "Food Insecurity," Toolkit for International Students, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://campusmentalhealth.ca/toolkits/international-students/food-insecurity/>

⁵ ibid

The grocery rebate in the 2023 Federal Budget was a beginning in addressing this growing issue. The system allowed for eligible couples with two children up to \$467, single Canadians without dependents up to \$234, and seniors with an additional \$225 on average⁶. This was directed to single adults and couples below certain incomes margins, which reflected those at the highest risk of facing food insecurity⁷. While this does not solve food insecurity; it is a benefit to those who need it. With the Grocery Rebate re-established, those who are struggling with food insecurity can experience subsidized grocery bills. This should also be targeted towards post-secondary students with low incomes, as food insecurity for those in post-secondary education can have long term effects beyond their time in post-secondary education. Doing so has the potential to reduce levels of stress, prevent disruption from learning, improve social relationships in post-secondary students and increase long term health and social advantages.

⁶ Government of Canada (Employment and Social Development Canada), "Household Food Insecurity in Canada — December 2024," Federal Government Data Release, accessed August 19, 2025, https://search.open.canada.ca/qpnotes/record/esdc-edsc%2CFCSDec2024_022.

⁷ Tarasuk, Valerie, and Tim Li. "Federal Budget 2023 Grocery Rebate Is the Right Direction on Food Insecurity, but There's a Long Road Ahead," The Conversation, published March 29, 2023, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/federal-budget-2023-grocery-rebate-is-the-right-direction-on-food-insecurity-but-theres-a-long-road-ahead-201926>.

2. Federal Equipment Rebate Program

Recommendation 2: The Department of Employment and Social Development Canada should introduce a Federal Equipment Rebate Program, investing \$660 million to provide up to \$300 annually per domestic and international postsecondary learner to offset the hidden costs of essential program materials such as textbooks, lab coats, and tools thereby promoting equitable access to education and improving student retention.

Post secondary students face an average of \$13,850 in annual non-tuition costs, which amounts to over 60% of their average income⁸. The cost of post-secondary education extends beyond housing and tuition to include hidden costs such as essential course materials including textbooks, lab coats, calculators and other program-specific equipment. Numerous post-secondary programs require additional costs for instruments & tools. For instance, many nursing programs typically require the purchase of scrubs and a stethoscope, which respectively cost approximately \$150 and \$130 each⁹. In addition, most Engineering programs require additional purchases such as Raspberry Pi Development Kit, specialty computer software's, and sensor kits. These additional costs in conjunction with the increasing cost of tuition and housing can add hundreds or thousands in unexpected expenses per year.

Models for relieving students of the financial burden caused by these additional fees have seen moderate success in aiding students. For example, McMaster's OER Lab which offers \$1000 - \$2500 in learning resources funding opportunities or Brock University's OER adoption grant, that aims to replace commercial textbooks, and covers hardware and software expenses, providing up to \$500 for individuals or \$1,500 for departmental teams¹⁰. Despite existing programs students still have to pay a significant amount out-of-pocket. With the prohibitive cost of course materials, students from low-income and or marginalized backgrounds can be greatly hindered in their pursuit of postsecondary education with additional educational fees limiting the number of viable program options due to financial constraints.

⁸ Ryan Romard, "When It Comes to Higher Education Costs, Tuition Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg - CCPA," CCPA -, July 10, 2023, <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/when-it-comes-to-higher-education-costs-tuition-is-just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg/>.

⁹ Queen's University, "Fees and Expenses," Academic Calendar 2025-2026, School of Nursing, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://www.queensu.ca/academic-calendar/nursing/course-expenses-approximate/>.

¹⁰ Brock University, "Open Educational Resources (OER) Services," Brock University, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://brocku.ca/library/oer/>. McMaster University, "Open Educational Resources (OER) Grant: Grant Types," McMaster University, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://mi.mcmaster.ca/oer-grant/#tab-content-grant-types>.

To effectively mitigate the financial burden of these costs and the resulting effects we recommend the introduction of a federal equipment rebate program of up to \$300 dollars annually per domestic and international student to offset hidden costs of essential course materials. We suggest that the eligibility is through enrolment verification and income thresholds which will reduce administrative barriers for students. Additionally, coordination with post-secondary institutions and student led organizations is recommended to pinpoint programs with high material costs which may guide budget planning by defining eligible costs therefore ensuring fair, consistent, and transparent student support.

3. Study Permits

Recommendation 3: The Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) should increase the allocation of study permits, particularly for international students enrolled in programs with work-integrated learning components such as coops and internships.

Starting in 2024 the Ministry of Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) placed a cap on the number of international study permits issued. Following the implementation of the cap, the number of study permits granted decreased approximately 24%, from 2023 - 2024¹¹. The international student cap has had various effects on the post-secondary sector impacting institutions across the country with Ontario and Nova Scotia experiencing the largest impact¹². In 2024 alone, The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) projected that the cap would have nearly a \$1 billion impact on Ontario Universities within the first two years alone¹³. Limits on International Study permits have resulted in numerous Post-Secondary Institutions facing financial hardship as loss of revenue from international students compounded with a lack of funding from the province has proven to be overly burdensome on Post-Secondary Institutions (PSI) current financial model.

¹¹ "Temporary Residents: Study Permit Holders - Monthly IRCC Updates - Canada - Study Permit Holders by Country of Citizenship and Year in Which Permit(s) Became Effective." Open Government Portal, April 12, 2017. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee/resource/b505b9bc-d375-4525-af39-afdf25639acf>.

¹² Basiri, Meti. "What Were the Impacts of Canada's 2024 International Student Cap?" ApplyBoard, January 22, 2025. <https://www.applyboard.com/applyinsights-article/what-were-the-impacts-of-canadas-2024-international-student-cap>.

¹³ Gamba, Angela La. "COU Statement: Impact of Federal Changes to International Student Study Permits." Ontario's Universities, October 18, 2024. <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/news/cou-statement-impact-of-federal-changes-to-international-student-study-permits/>.

Beyond the impact on post-secondary institutions this cap also impacts the Canadian economy. In 2022, international students and their visiting families made an astounding \$37.3 billion in total annual expenditures, increasing Canada's GDP by \$30.9 billion¹⁴. Ontario witnessed the highest influx of international students and contributed \$16.9 billion to the province's revenue equating to 54.6% of the overall GDP impact. Understanding the role and contributions of international students holistically highlights both their enrichment of campuses alongside their contributions to the Canadian economy.

Understanding of the Federal governments commitments we recommend that The Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) should increase the allocation of study permits. To do so we ask that the IRCC maintain the Provincial Attestation Letters (PAL) allocated to Ontario at the 2023 target number to curb the projected \$1 billion dollar loss in Ontario's PSE sector. By sustaining the number of allocated PAL the Federal government can allow PSI in Ontario and across Canada the required time needed to adequately deal with the budget changes while seeking increased funding from the provincial government.

¹² Cassa. "The Economic Impact and Challenges of International Students." CASSA, November 30, 2024. <https://www.cassa.ca/the-economic-impact-and-challenges-of-international-students/>.

4. Canadian Dental Care Plan

Recommendation 4: Health Canada should amend the Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP) eligibility criteria to adopt a layered insurance model. Enabling students to opt into the CDCP if their private or institutional dental plan offers inadequate coverage, requires high out-of-pocket premiums, or if they are international students without access to public healthcare.

Access to affordable and quality dental care is not guaranteed for many Canadians despite the view that dental care much like health care falls within ones Human Rights. In addressing this matter, the Canadian Governments launch of the Candian Dental Care Plan made great strides in providing Canadians access to quality dental care. While the CDCP has definitely made considerable progress on this front, concern regarding the eligibility structure has been flagged due to its problematic nature for many students.

Many student plans have limited dental coverage (e.g., partial coverage for fillings or cleanings, little/no coverage for crowns or root canals) - for this reason CDCP would be beneficial and required by many to cover those extras. As it currently stands the large majority of post-secondary students are left unsupported by the CDCP due to restrictive eligibility rules. Students with employer, professional, or school-provided dental coverage, regardless of the cost or adequacy of said coverage, are disqualified from accessing the CDCP, regardless of the comprehensiveness of their coverage or the financial burden that insurance premiums may result in. Moreover, International students, who are among the most financially vulnerable, are excluded altogether. These gaps undermine the CDCP's goal of expanding access to essential dental care and halt students from accessing the support the CDCP provides.

For these reasons, we recommend that Health Canada amend the CDCP eligibility criteria to adopt a layered insurance model, allowing full-time post-secondary students to opt in where their existing coverage is inadequate or financially burdensome. Under this model, dental services that are fully or partially covered by a student's private or institutional plan would not be eligible for duplication under the CDCP. However, services that are entirely uncovered by a student's plan would be eligible for CDCP coverage. This approach would extend eligibility to students whose plans offer limited dental coverage, require high out-of-pocket premiums, or international students without access to public healthcare. By altering the eligibility criteria in this manner, we can ensure that all students have access to essential dental care while preventing duplication and maintaining program sustainability.

