

# **COVID-19 Initiatives for People with Disabilities In Post-Secondary Education**

National Educational Association of Disabled  
Students (NEADS) – Guide 2020/2021

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# About NEADS

Since its founding in 1986, the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) has supported full access to education and employment for post-secondary students and graduates with disabilities across Canada.

NEADS is a consumer-controlled, cross-disability charitable organization. We represent our constituents through specific projects, resources, research, publications and partnerships. NEADS is governed by a national Board of Directors representative of all provinces and territories.

Our work as an organization is focused on the needs of students with disabilities across three core Strategic Program areas:

1. student debt reduction
2. student experience in class and on campus
3. student and graduate employment

The organization collaborates with post-secondary stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, employers, disability service providers on college and university campuses and communities that can improve opportunities in higher education and the labour market for Canadians with disabilities.

NEADS also provides ongoing expert advice to Employment and Social Development Canada and provincial/territorial governments. We have been a stakeholder group of the Government of Canada's National Advisory Group on Student Financial Assistance — Chaired by the Director General of the Canada Student Loans Program — since 1987. Our work includes promoting government programs and services that support higher education for Canadians with disabilities. The Association is a member organization of the Council of Canadians With Disabilities (CCD): <http://www.ccdonline.ca>

## National Office Support and Services

The Association effectively delivers a number of core programs. Our primary activities include: maintaining a comprehensive website at [www.neads.ca](http://www.neads.ca), and a separate financial aid portal, [www.disabilityawards.ca](http://www.disabilityawards.ca); offering skill training resources to students with disabilities in post-secondary education and employment; conducting relevant research on access to post-secondary education and employment opportunities; and holding regional events across Canada designed to provide resources and skill development to students with disabilities. NEADS has also developed a feature-rich employment portal: <http://breakingitdown.neads.ca/>

The Association provides information and referrals to hundreds of post-secondary students with disabilities through its national office. It also responds to requests for information and advice from employers, provincial and federal government departments, post-secondary

service providers and faculty members on , the offices of federal Members of Parliament and members of provincial and territorial legislatures, and other non-profit organizations.

### **NEADS National Scholarship Programs**

NEADS runs three national scholarship programs:

- the \$3,000 NEADS National Student Awards Program,
- the \$1,000 NEADS Holly Bartlett Memorial Award, and
- the \$1,000 NEADS Christine Nieder Memorial Award.

These programs support students with disabilities in undergraduate and graduate university and college programs, and CEGEP-level programs. This funding is available to students in all fields of study, and represent the only funding programs of their kind in Canada recognizing the academic and community achievements of post-secondary students with disabilities.

The National Student Awards Program, currently in its seventh year, has received more than 1,000 applications and awarded 63 scholarships to outstanding applicants across the country. It supports disabled students, who often need additional financial assistance to be successful in their studies due in part to accommodating their needs in the campus setting. These tuition awards are payable directly to the student's school.

The Holly Bartlett Memorial Award was established in memory of former NEADS board member Holly Bartlett, who passed away in March 2010. The award was created in 2011 and provides a \$1,000 scholarship, based on the same criteria as NEADS' Student Awards Program.

The Christine Nieder Memorial Award was established in 2015 to commemorate the life and contributions of former NEADS board member Christine Nieder, who passed away in July 2014. The \$1,000 award is offered annually to a graduate student with a disability, in recognition of Christine's passionate work to address barriers faced to participation in graduate programs of study.

NEADS also manages the application system for the Accessible Media Inc. (AMI) Robert Pearson Memorial Scholarship, and promotes the award. This scholarship was launched in 2012 and is open to Canadian students enrolled in a diploma or degree program at a Canadian post-secondary school. Two scholarships valued at \$5,000 each are awarded annually to students with a disability, one English-speaking and one francophone.

**Donate to help NEADS Continue Its Work on Behalf of Post-Secondary Students and Graduates with Disabilities!**

NEADS is a registered charity. Donations are tax-deductible and you will receive a charitable tax receipt for 100% of your gift(s) to the Association

To minimize administrative costs, NEADS uses the services of CanadaHelps for our online donation transactions. CanadaHelps offers organizations a secure and easy online platform for donors to give. You can donate to our organization through CanadaHelps at <https://www.canadahelps.org/dn/344>

# Overview

According to the Government of Canada guidance document [COVID-19 and people with disabilities](#): “COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that is known to spread from person to person. The virus is most commonly contracted from an infected person through coughing or sneezing, close contact such as touching or shaking hands, or touching an object with the virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing your hands. Items and surfaces a person with COVID-19 has touched can carry the virus on them, so it is always important to wash your hands and clean frequently touched items and surfaces” (Government of Canada, 2020).

Vulnerable populations in Canada, such as those with disability, are particularly susceptible to contracting the virus. Many organizations, care attendants, resources and funding essential to the daily life of those with disabilities have either been temporarily paused during the pandemic to abide by social distancing rules, or are running at reduced capacity.

This guide is intended as a comprehensive and detailed account of Canadian federal, provincial, and post-secondary initiatives that can help people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that NEADS represents college and university students with disabilities, the guide is primarily focused on those measures that support disabled persons in post-secondary study. Initiatives highlighted in this guide are understood to mean additional funding (bursaries, benefits, changes to tax credits), changes to operations (virtual meetings, limited person to person contact), additional resources (tip sheets on how to work online, help with assistive technology), and understanding the population most affected (surveys, polls) by the pandemic. Our research also extends to external resources, such as articles, journals, and other forms of research conducted on this subject matter.

We hope this initiative helps to improve the full participation and access to programs and services for people with disabilities during the pandemic. We recognize that modes of learning, including online platforms and enhancement for federal and provincial aid programs, may well continue beyond the current crisis. The pandemic has forced colleges and universities, teaching staff and service providers to do things differently, and the post-secondary experience, like other aspects of life, may never be quite the same after the pandemic as they were prior to its start. This presents both opportunities and challenges for disabled students in learning and career spaces.

This guide is organized into the following sections:

- Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)
  - Provides an overview of the virus, how it can be treated, and how it affects people with disabilities
- Federal and Provincial Initiatives

- Provides information on Federal aid initiatives for Canadians, including of programs, benefits, and tax credits, and addresses public concern with these services.
- Post-Secondary Initiatives
  - Explores how post-secondary institutions are helping students during the pandemic via services and operations. This section also investigates ways in which campus accessibility centres are providing services to students with disabilities, and any current additional resources for its students. Student union-led initiatives are also reviewed.
- Learning Technologies
  - Looks at how post-secondary institutions are addressing students' online accessibility issues, and learning strategies.
- International Students with Disabilities
  - Explores aid available for international students during the pandemic, especially those with disabilities.
- Events During COVID-19
  - Explores COVID-19 related events organized at the federal, provincial, and post-secondary levels focused on accessibility, health and safety, financial aid and other key concerns for people with disabilities.
- Mental Health
  - Explores how COVID-19 and mental health are intersecting during the pandemic, highlights the work of organizations focused in this area and resources they offer.
- Future of Campus Life
  - Explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on post-secondary campuses and plans for the future of campus life.

# Novel Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19)

## What is COVID-19?

According to The World Health Organization (WHO), "COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus." (World Health Organization, 2020) It is spread through droplets that one can be exposed to through coughing and sneezing. Social distancing measures (at least 2 meters or 6 feet) and masks have proven important and effective in preventing further spread of the virus.

As of August 12, 2020, there were more than 100,000 known cases of COVID-19 in Canada, with over 35,000 recovered, and over 8,000 deaths due to the virus. While vaccines are now becoming available for distribution, most jurisdictions continue to recommend or require residents to remain at home except for essential reasons, to wear a mask in public spaces, and regularly wash/sanitize hands.

The virus may present with a range of mild to severe respiratory effects. The [Government of Canada](#) states that symptoms may appear up to 14 days after exposure to COVID-19. Those infected with the virus may not develop any symptoms (asymptomatic) or very mild symptoms (pre-symptomatic). Yet indications suggest these individuals are still capable of passing the virus to others. The most common symptoms include coughing, fever, loss of smell or taste, shortness of breath, and the general feeling of being unwell (Government of Canada, 2020). Severe cases can lead to death.

## Treating the Virus

Although, in the first 9 months of the pandemic, vaccines were not yet readily available, the main "treatment" in treating the virus was understood to be self-isolation at home to protect loved ones and the public. In the discovery phase of the virus, its initial appearance may resemble the flu or a cold, and a laboratory diagnosis confirms existence of the virus. Those who test positive must isolate at home for 14 days or as directed by your provincial health authority, whether you show symptoms or not. Asymptomatic individuals should also isolate at home until confirmation of laboratory tests (Government of Canada, 2020). The Government of Canada has also advised that "if you did not have symptoms when you got tested, but then develop symptoms during your 14-day isolation period, you must restart your isolation time." Most people with mild symptoms may recover on their own and can consult their health care provider who may recommend steps to relieve symptoms (Government of Canada, 2020).

On December 9, 2020, Health Canada has authorized the first COVID-19 vaccine in Canada administered by Pfizer-BioNTech. Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine was approved by Health Canada on December 23, 2020. Since the release of the vaccine in December, more than half a million Canadians have been vaccinated for COVID-19 thus far, and more than 822,000 doses of the two approved vaccines have been delivered from the two companies, and Canada is in

agreement for more vaccines' rollouts later in the year which causes limitations in its availability (Rabson, 2021). As of January 2021, there is a total of 747,000 COVID-19 cases in Canada, over 664,000 recovered and over 19, 000 COVID-19 deaths – making vaccinations the most utmost concerns for all Canadians. However, due to limited availability those who are health care professionals, over the age of 70, seniors in long-term care homes, and adults in Indigenous communities are categorized priority high-risk groups – therefore, these groups are prioritized in receiving the vaccine.

## COVID-19 and People with Disabilities

Evidence indicates that certain groups, including people with disabilities, may be at increased risk of COVID-19. This is particularly true for those who are immune-compromised or require additional support in daily living, given more frequent required contact with people such as care and support providers. The Government of Canada advises individuals with disabilities and those who care for/support them can protect themselves by:

- staying home except for necessary activities like doctor appointments or getting groceries.
- asking family, neighbours or friends to help with essential errands (e.g., picking up prescriptions, buying groceries).
- practicing physical distancing with those who are not in your household, as much as possible.
- handwashing and/or supporting handwashing for individuals with disabilities. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be used where water and soap is not readily available.
- avoiding contact with others who are sick. Ask direct support/care providers/friends and family, if they are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 or have been in contact with someone who has COVID-19. Care/support or family members should confirm that they do not have symptoms prior to interaction with individuals with disabilities.

Immediately notify or have others notify family/care providers/friends if you or the persons you are caring for/supporting becomes ill.

[Citizens with Disabilities – Ontario](#) (CWDO) -- an independent disabled persons group and a member of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities – has created a guide of supports for individuals with disabilities, including physical and mental health. The guide also raises concerns around care challenges for infected individuals with disabilities. In the section, “Will a hospital give me equal access to care?”, CWDO notes that as the number of COVID-19 cases increase, the likelihood of those with disabilities gaining access to equal care may decrease due to resource availability. The guide cites an opinion piece from the New York Times advising doctors to not abandon the principle of non-discrimination. The piece highlights Italy’s battle with rising COVID-19 cases early in the pandemic, which left doctors rationing access to care on the basis of age and disability (Ne’eman, 2020).

If the shortage of care were to happen in Ontario, provincial ‘triage protocol’ would likely be used to determine who would receive lifesaving treatment in the absence of sufficient ventilators and other resources. An article in the Toronto Star, shared by CWDO, states that this policy document “will shape life-or-death choices over which patients to prioritize if hospitals become overwhelmed by the COVID-19 outbreak” (Yang, 2020).

These are the three guiding principles that would guide the triage protocol, as summarized by the CWDO:

1. **Utility** – Physicians should allocate resources to patients who stand to benefit the most.
2. **Proportionality** – The number of patients who will be negatively affected by this last-resort triage system should not exceed the number of people who stand to benefit.
3. **Fairness** – Only clinical information should be used to decide which patients are treated over others. Priority should not be given to anyone on the basis of socioeconomic privilege, or political rank.

A section of the CWDO guide is focused on whether those with disabilities would be allowed visitation if admitted to hospital. It states, “Typically, people with disabilities who are hospitalized depend on visits from family, friends and attendants to make up for the care that hospital staff are too busy to provide: this could be turning in bed, skin care, feeding, repositioning, even washroom assistance and transferring.” The guide clarifies that hospitals are likely to only permit visitors who perform essential services for COVID-19 patients with disabilities. The guide advises individuals to visit [ARCH Disability Law](#) to understand how to navigate these situations and for legal advice, if necessary

Those with speech, language, and communication disabilities need individualized supports if admitted to hospital due to COVID-19. Barrier Free Canada cites a [Toronto Star](#) article focused on how the pandemic highlights existing barriers for those with communication disabilities. It states, “Organizations and individuals point to recent cases in which disabled patients were denied access to crucial communication supports while in hospital, leaving them unable to interact with loved ones or medical professionals.” Given that communication is a human right, those who use ASL and LSQ have the right to sign language interpretation while hospitalized. However, two recent incidents highlighted the conversations surrounding disabled people and hospitalization – especially during the pandemic – resulting in recommendations for hospitals across Canada to “prompt governments to set uniform standards to protect disabled patients” (McQuigge, 2020).

In one incident, a 40-year-old British Columbia woman with cerebral palsy died in April 2020 after pandemic protection policies in her facility had barred support workers who usually assisted her in communication from entering the premises. In another case, a man from Toronto who used his iPad to communicate with relatives was limited to its use for one hour per day, after the hospital deemed the device a surveillance tool. As there are no uniform standard for each hospital in Canada, they developed their own policies which can be problematic in cases such as these. Furthermore, the Executive Director of Communication

Disabilities Across Canada (CDAC), Barbara Collier, states these practices must change. She explains that “health-care facilities across the country should be given direction on everything from establishing a patient’s communication needs during intake to policies around support workers, adding these long-standing gaps take on additional urgency as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold” (McQuigge, 2020).

The CDAC created the [COVID-19 Communication Rights Toolkit](#) to guide the issue of communication rights in healthcare, such as the use of a communication accommodation form to notify your healthcare team. The document also provides resources that may be beneficial for those with disabilities and healthcare workers.

These communication supports provided and supported by the CWDO may be useful to those in need.

- Communication boards for COVID-19:
  - [Boardmaker Online](#)
  - [Coughdrop](#)
  - [Patient-Provider Communication \(English\)](#)
  - [Patient-Provider Communication \(Bilingual – Arabic, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish\)](#)
- Using AAC in the hospital:
  - [Using AAC in hospitals during the coronavirus](#)
  - [COVID-19 Communication Rights Toolkit \(Communication Disabilities Access Canada, adapted from materials by Communication First\)](#)
  - [Patient Easy-Read Symbol Sheets](#)
- [Keeping your AAC device clean during coronavirus](#)
- [COVID-19 Communication Rights Toolkit \(Communication First\)](#)

These additional resources shared by CWDO are also intended to support those with disabilities during the pandemic:

- Getting food and supplies during COVID-19: [www.ontariocommunitysupport.ca](http://www.ontariocommunitysupport.ca)
- For seniors, people with disabilities, and others in need of assistance to connect to essential services: [www.211ontario.ca](http://www.211ontario.ca)
- [Homecare and Direct Funding](#)
- [Finding Suppliers for PPE](#)
- To find neighbours in your neighbourhood who might be able to assist you: <https://ca.nextdoor.com/>
- For mental health services for those over the age of 18: <https://www.connexontario.ca/>
- BounceBack is a guided self-help program with phone coaching support: [bouncebackontario.ca](http://bouncebackontario.ca)

- Visit the Canadian Disability Participation Program for more information on staying active: <https://cdpp.ca/get-involved>
- CAMH offers information for those dealing with anxiety: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19#coping>
- Connecting Families assists low-income families with internet connection plans and access to a computer: <https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/111.nsf/eng/home>
- Autistics United Canada hosts online hangouts on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Visit their [Facebook page](#)
- Chronically Queer provides a welcoming and safe environment for LGBTQIA2S+ identified people with chronic health conditions or disabilities to come together and share their experiences: [Chronically Queer](#)

As the vaccine rollout continues, people with disabilities haven't been categorized as a high priority group, despite heightened exposure risk due to essential contact with various people, such as multiple care providers/support. Disability rights advocates have expressed concern that once again those with disabilities are being excluded, discriminated, and neglected during Canada's response to the pandemic. In the article "[Reach the furthest behind first: Persons with disabilities must be prioritized in accessing COVID-19 vaccinations](#)" the International Disability Alliance (IDA) emphasizes the World Health Organization's categorization of persons with disabilities as a vulnerable population during public health emergencies – such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The IDA concludes that "persons with disabilities, by reason of their increased exposure to COVID-19 and all its consequences, should be prioritized in vaccination strategies. Otherwise, they will be left further behind, experiencing disproportionate loss of lives and livelihoods, inaccessible health care services, and undignified lives and aggravated disconnection from the society" (International Disability Alliance, 2021).

# Federal & Provincial Initiatives

Federal and provincial governments have established funding initiatives to aid individuals and help organizations continue to operate during the pandemic. Canada has allocated over \$150 billion to support individuals, communities, and businesses during the pandemic. Of that, \$573 million is allocated to support organizations and federal programs that help people with disabilities, such as those offered through Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) (Government of Canada, 2020). Federal benefits, such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) for post-secondary students, were created to support Canadians during these uncertain times. In addition, the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) was updated to support Canadians with disabilities during the pandemic with a one-time COVID benefit of \$600 to DTC recipients.. While these resources have helped Canadians during COVID-19, there have been criticisms of these systems and operations.

At the provincial level, some governments have created additional funding through established disability benefits programs. The Government of British Columbia, for example, added an additional \$300 to support cheques for the months of April, May, June, July, and August 2020 (Government of British Columbia, 2021).

## Federal Programs, Benefits, and Tax Credits

### Federal Programs

Federal programs for people with disabilities have either received additional funding with the intent to distribute to organizations supporting people with disabilities, or have issued surveys and other feedback channels to better understand the extent of hardships faced by people with disabilities due to the pandemic.

Programs offered through federal departments including the Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), introduced new funding for the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. On June 1, 2020, the ESDC announced that they plan to distribute \$6.4 million over the next three years to up to sixteen organizations that partner with the ESDC. These organizations include: Prosper Canada, University of Manitoba, Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, Le Flambeau: finances inclusives, Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW), Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society (IRIS), Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA), The Assembly of First Nations, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, The Native Women's Association of Canada, Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation, L'Arche Canada, Eviance, Active Living Alliance for Canadians with Disabilities, and Dawn Canada (Government of Canada, 2020).

The **Accessible Technology Program** also received new federal funding to support new projects. In the press release announcing the program, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced

\$557,725 for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind to create accessible payment terminals for individuals with sight loss; \$106,425 for the University of Laval to develop an arm support that will allow Canadians with disabilities to use standard technology; \$199,850 for the Regional Health Authority B, operating as Horizon Health Network, to develop a system that allows Canadians with neurological conditions to interact with technology for a longer period of time; \$251,088 for Ryerson University to develop a prototype that will allow individuals with speech disabilities to navigate images to reply to written or spoken messages; \$70,307 for the Secret Study Projects to develop extended expression software with voice and Braille controls (Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, 2020).

Trudeau had also announced the *National Workplace Accessibility Stream of the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities* “to provide additional funding for Canadians with disabilities and employers to improve workplace accessibility and access to jobs in response to COVID-19” (Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, 2020). Additional funding will support activities including:

- Setting up accessible and effective work-from-home measures
- Expanding online training opportunities
- Creating inclusive workplaces, whether virtual or physical
- Connecting people with disabilities to employers
- Training for in-demand jobs
- Wage subsidies

**Statistics Canada** conducted a survey in 2020 to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians living with long term conditions and disabilities. As stated on the [survey page](#), “We are asking about the challenges of living with a long-term condition or disability during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how that has impacted employment, household expenses, and access to health services. Anybody living in Canada who has a long-term condition or disability, including undiagnosed or non-visible, can participate. Caregivers may also respond on behalf of someone who cannot participate on their own, including their children” (Statistics Canada, 2020). Notable questions sought information on occupation, mental health during the pandemic, any therapies or services needed during the pandemic, and any testing/medical attention that respondents may or may not receive due to COVID-19.

This [infographic](#) designed by Statistics Canada details how persons with disabilities may be impacted by COVID-19 based on data from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability. Some of the major findings displayed on the 2017 infographic include:

- among the 6.2 million Canadians aged 15 and older with a disability, 21% (1.3 million) live alone;
- almost half (49%) of those with a disability received help with daily activities because of their condition;
- and 36% relied only on help from outside their household.”

On August 27, 2020, Statistics Canada released their full findings on the COVID-19 impacts on Canadians living with a long-term condition or disability. The findings are also available in [audio format](#). As indicated in their review, participants with long-term conditions or disabilities had difficulty maintaining employment due to COVID-19. Below is a review of their findings:

- Over one-third of participants with long-term conditions or disabilities report experiencing a temporary or permanent job loss or reduced hours during the pandemic
- Employment changes are more likely among young participants and those with lower levels of education
- The majority of employed participants with long-term conditions or disabilities report working from home
- Overall, 61% of participants aged 15 to 64 with long-term conditions or disabilities reported a major or moderate impact from COVID-19 on at least one type of financial obligation or essential need

Read the full review of the “Impacts of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities” by Statistics Canada [here](#).

### **COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group**

Employment and Social Development Canada

In April 2020, the Federal government announced the establishment of the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group (CDAG), to advise the Minister on lived experiences of persons with disabilities during the pandemic related to disability-specific issues, challenges and systemic gaps. The full context of the group’s announcement is below, and more information on the CDAG and its members can be found [here](#).

“During this time of public health and economic crisis, in the spirit of “Nothing Without Us” and the Accessible Canada Act, and in recognition of Canada’s domestic and international human rights obligations, the Government of Canada is committed to ensuring that it considers, respects and incorporates the interests and needs of persons with disabilities into its decision-making and pandemic response.

Persons with disabilities face unique and heightened challenges and vulnerabilities in a time of pandemic, including equality of access to health care and supports, access to information and communications, mental health and social isolation and employment and income supports. Additional vigilance is also required to protect the human rights of persons with disabilities during these times. This necessitates a disability inclusive approach to Government decision-making and action.

The Government of Canada is taking immediate, significant and decisive action by announcing the establishment of the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group (CDAG). The CDAG will advise the Minister on the real-time lived experiences of persons with disabilities during this crisis on

disability-specific issues, challenges and systemic gaps and on strategies, measures and steps to be taken.

Co-chaired by Minister Qualtrough, the Advisory Group will be comprised of individual experts from the disability community.”

The Advisory Group’s work identified the following priority recommendations for consideration of the Government of Canada.

#### Finances and employment

- Provide income support to persons with disabilities during the pandemic. This includes, but is not limited to, a \$350 a month financial supplement for persons with disabilities for 6 months during the pandemic. Specifically, the supplement is for individuals and their families accessing federal, provincial and territorial benefits

#### Public communications and accessibility

- Conduct an awareness campaign to enable the general public to better understand the special social distancing issues persons with vision loss are experiencing. Support the sighted community to learn how best to interact with people who are blind or low vision at this time
- Establish and implement accessible communications guidelines and practices consistently across all Government of Canada operations and by entities under federal jurisdiction

#### Support for civil society and the not-for-profit sector

- Recognize non-profits in the Government of Canada’s wage subsidy program
- Ensure access for disability organizations to the new Emergency Community Support Fund (ECSF):
  - earmark 25% of the ECSF for disability organizations

#### Federal, provincial and territorial collaboration and coordination, including health care

- Continue to work with federal, provincial and territorial counterparts on multiple issues affecting persons with disabilities, including:
  - triage protocols
  - hospital visitation policies
  - making personal support workers essential workers
- Develop public health guidance for congregate living, as has been done for long-term care
- Involve persons with disabilities in developing public health guidance
- Ensure universal access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including access to clear, accessible masks for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Create and be prepared to rapidly implement an emergency response plan to support persons with disabilities when emergencies arise in the future. This includes preparing for a possible second wave of COVID-19

For more information regarding priority recommendations recommended by the Disability Advisory Group, click [here](#).

**Council of Canadians with Disabilities Response to COVID-19 Funding Falling Through Cracks**

For Immediate Release | June 11, 2020

June 10, 2020 marked a disappointing day for Canadians with disabilities. Finally, government put forward financial relief for Canadians with disabilities only to have the bill fail on the floor. Once again, Canadians with disabilities have been further marginalized in receiving necessary COVID-19 financial relief support.

When attempting to separate the bill to ensure some Canadians, at least those with the disability tax credit certificate, would receive immediate support, the opposition opposed and blocked any discussion, using this moment to push for the entire house to be called back before further discussion. The result is that Canadians with disabilities have fallen through the cracks, once again.

Further distressing is that this bill was left to the end of session, and that the COVID-19 support for disabilities was grouped in an unrelated fraudulent and punitive section of the bill intended to address CERB offenders.

Canadians with disabilities have been and are being treated as an afterthought. This is not acceptable. Government stated in their mandate letter that they intended “to ensure a consistent approach to disability inclusion and supports across government that addresses the unfairness and inequities in government programs and services, and challenges the biases built into government”. Canadians with disabilities are waiting for government to demonstrate that they recognize and value all citizens.

The result of this partisan behaviour is that all disabled Canadians are left waiting for the government to respond to our needs during this pandemic. It is imperative that the Government of Canada urgently address the situation and support Canadians that are at extreme risk and require additional support to ensure their basic health and safety needs at this time.

The time has come for government to do the right thing.

For More Information Contact:

Jewelless Smith, CCD Chairperson, [jewelless.smith@gmail.com](mailto:jewelless.smith@gmail.com)

John Rae, 2nd Vice Chair and Chair of CCD Social Policy Committee, Telephone: 416-941-1547, Email: [thepenguin@rogers.com](mailto:thepenguin@rogers.com) (NEADS - Media)

### **Barrier Free Canada**

This non-governmental program advocates for the “Canadian Parliament to enact a strong and effective **Canadians with Disabilities Act (CDA)** to achieve a barrier-free Canada for all persons with disabilities” (Barrier Free Canada, 2020)

On May 5, 2020, Barrier Free Canada reported on a survey conducted by the Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB) regarding the impact of the “[COVID-19 Pandemic on Canadians Who are](#)

[Blind, Deaf-Blind, and Partially Sighted.](#)” Between April 7 and 14, 2020, a total of 572 responses from members of the vision loss community were recorded. Questions asked about employment issues, health care, financial issues, government performance etc. In the recommendations section of the report, it was noted that that one of the major concerns of the vision loss community is that at times they are unaware of “whether they’re observing social distancing and that the sighted community is often not paying attention to the fact that they’re unaware that they may be too close. As a result, the sighted community tends to come too close to people with vision loss. Almost half the respondents said that they haven’t felt safe going outside their homes since the onset of the pandemic” (Canadian Council of the Blind, 2020). Further to this, Respondent 196 (referred to this way to protect the identity of the individual) responded:

“As a totally blind individual I find that people whom I encounter while walking or shopping do not understand that I am unable to self distance from others. Firstly they regularly do not make me aware of their presence so that I can take the proper action. Secondly people often approach me closely not taking responsibility for self distancing to protect me. Thirdly the practice of controlling numbers in stores neglects the issue that I can not maintain proper self distancing when forced to line up either to enter the store or to reach a check out. There is no messaging on the media about considering how to help those who can not readily self distance due to a disability.”

## Federal Benefits

### Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

This benefit was created in response to COVID-19, to aid Canadians forced out of work due to the pandemic who were not eligible for Employment Insurance. CERB was designed to provide “financial support to employed and self-employed Canadians who are directly affected by COVID-19” (Government of Canada, 2020). It allowed recipients to claim \$2,000 every four weeks over the course of 16 weeks, before being extended to a maximum of 28 weeks. To be eligible [to apply for CERB](#), a recipient must reside in Canada and be at least 15 years of age, cannot apply for EI (employment insurance) from Service Canada in the same eligibility period, did not quit their job voluntarily, earned a minimum of \$5,000 (before taxes) in the last 12 months, had work hours reduced, or was unable to work due to COVID-19 (Government of Canada, 2020). Applications are submitted through the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) or Service Canada.

While CERB has supported millions of Canadians during the pandemic, there have been concerns regarding eligibility in complex situations, people being paid double the amount in one period, and recently, the government’s intention to shift away from CERB. Many parliamentary leaders -- particularly the federal NDP -- called upon Prime Minister Trudeau to revise CERB, as the qualifications had many Canadians confused as to whether they would be able to qualify for the benefit or not. The [revisions](#) accounted for part-time and other workers, especially those who had essential jobs that had paid less than what CERB was offering.

The original plan of the taxable benefit allowed \$2,000 every two weeks up to four months for workers who have lost their income due to the pandemic. However, on April 14, 2020, former Finance Minister, Bill Morneau, announced the new changes imposed on CERB that had continued into October 2020. These new changes included allowing Canadians to earn up to \$1,000 per month while collecting CERB, extending CERB to seasonal workers who have exhausted their Employment Insurance Benefits, and extend the CERB to workers who are unable to find a job or unable return to their previous jobs due to the pandemic. In a recent update, the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), is effective starting September 27, 2020. This benefit will provide relief for Canadians who did not qualify for the updated Employment Insurance (EI) program and still need assistance. This benefit ends September 25, 2021.

### **Changes to Canada Summer Jobs program to help businesses and young Canadians affected by COVID-19**

In April 2020, the Federal government announced changes to the Canada Summer Jobs program to help employers hire young Canadians as summer staff during the pandemic. The changes are outlined in this release:

“The Government of Canada is taking unprecedented action to support workers, businesses, and all Canadians impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Right now, young people are facing serious challenges finding work. To build the foundations of strong communities, we need a strong workforce that includes good job opportunities for youth. That is why the government is working to help employers adapt to the realities of COVID-19, and supporting young Canadians as they begin to look for summer employment.

Today, the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, announced temporary changes to the Canada Summer Jobs program that will help employers hire summer staff and provide young Canadians access to the jobs they need during this unprecedented time. This program will help create up to 70,000 jobs for youth between 15 and 30 years of age. Canada’s small businesses increasingly depend on the employment of young Canadians. The changes to the Canada Summer Jobs program will help small businesses hire and keep the workers they need so they can continue to deliver essential services.

The temporary changes to the program for this year include:

- an increase to the wage subsidy, so that private and public sector employers can also receive up to 100 per cent of the provincial or territorial minimum hourly wage for each employee
- an extension to the end date for employment to February 28, 2021 allowing employers to adapt their projects and job activities to support essential services
- allowing employers to hire staff on a part-time basis. These changes will help youth stay connected to the labour market, save money for their future, and find quality jobs in safe, inclusive, and healthy work environments.

Today’s announcement builds on the government’s action taken for young Canadians during this crisis. This includes a six-month, interest-free moratorium on Canada Student Loans, and a 75

per cent wage subsidy for businesses that will help more employers keep part-time employees and workers over the coming months. Despite these important steps, there is still more to do for students and young Canadians. The Government of Canada will continue to look for ways to support all Canadians, including students and young people, as we weather this pandemic together.

The Canada Summer Jobs program provides opportunities for youth to develop and improve their skills within the not-for-profit, small business, and public sectors, and supports the delivery of key community services. By adapting the program this year, the Government of Canada is making sure that we have the resources needed to support Canadian workers, businesses, and communities dealing with the social and economic impacts of COVID-19” ([Source](#))

### **The Canada Pension Plan (CPP) Disability Benefit**

The one-time payment for people with disabilities provides up to \$600 as the Government of Canada recognizes “the extraordinary expenses incurred by persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Government of Canada, 2021). To be eligible for this one-time payment, participants must have:

- “you had a valid 2020 Disability Tax Credit (DTC) certificate from the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)
- you were eligible and applied for the DTC by December 31, 2020
- you were a beneficiary as at July 1, 2020 of:
  - Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPPD)
  - Quebec Pension Plan Disability Pension (QPPD)
  - Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) disability supports provided to veterans (War Service and Canadian Armed Forces) and former Royal Canadian Mounted Police, including:
    - Disability Pension
    - Disability Award
    - Pain and Suffering Compensation
    - Critical Injury Benefit
    - Rehabilitation Services and Vocational Assistance Program
    - Income Replacement Benefit
    - Canadian Forces Income Support” (Government of Canada, 2021).

To learn more about the one-time payment, and how it can be distributed – click [here](#).

### **The Canadian Emergency Student Benefit (CESB)**

This benefit was created by the Federal government to “provide financial support to post-secondary students, and recent post-secondary and high school graduates who are unable to find work due to COVID-19. This benefit is for students who do not qualify for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or Employment Insurance (EI)” (Government of Canada, 2021).

From May 2020 to September 2020, eligible students were provided \$1,250 for every four-week period, or \$2,000 for every four-week period if they had dependents or a disability.

The Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) page states that eligibility is considered if:

- The student did not receive, apply nor qualify for CERB;
- are enrolled in a post-secondary educational program (at least 12 weeks in duration) that leads to a certificate, diploma, or degree; completed or ended post-secondary educational studies in December 2019 or later;
- completed or expect to complete high school, or received, or expect to receive your high school equivalency in 2020, and have applied for a post-secondary educational program that starts before February 1, 2021.

Students are deemed eligible for CESB if they are unable to work due to COVID-19, looking for but cannot find work due to COVID-19, currently working during the COVID-19 pandemic but have income from employment and self-employment of \$1,000 or less (before taxes) during the four-week period prior to applying.. Students can apply for CESB through Service Canada or CRA.

## Federal Tax Credits

During the pandemic, several tax credits have also been highlighted, revised, and updated.

The [Disability Tax Credit \(DTC\)](#) is a non-refundable tax credit that supports people with disabilities or their care attendants to reduce the income tax they have to pay (Government of Canada, 2021). One is eligible if their Disability Tax Credit Certificate has been approved. A medical practitioner must confirm that the applicant has a prolonged and severe impairment.

In a [Disability Tax Credit \(DTC\) workshop video](#), Peter Julian, NDP Member of Parliament for New Westminster British Columbia, discusses challenges posed by the DTC and provides steps on how to access the credit and what to do if one is not qualified for the credit or is unsure of the process. MP Julian notes that the DTC has a long way to go in ensuring it can effectively help those with disabilities. He states that less than 40% of Canadians with severe disabilities have access to DTC. [Statistics Canada Canadian Survey on Disability Reports](#) in 2018 indicated that 22% of the Canadian population – 6.2 million individuals – have one or more disabilities. This means that if less than 40% of Canadians with disabilities can access to DTC, over 3.7 million Canadians with disabilities are not accounted for. In a [press release](#) he states that, “The Disability Tax Credit is a discredited tool because many people with disabilities either don’t know about it, can’t pay for the medical confirmation, or get rejected due to increasingly restrictive rules. I have done over 600 DTC town halls across Canada to help people get the Disability Tax Credit and know how dysfunctional the federal system is for persons living with disabilities”.

An article released by [CTV News](#) shares comments from NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, accusing the Federal government of failing to support Canadians with disabilities during the pandemic. On Newstalk 580 CFRA's "The Goods with Dahlia Kurtz" podcast, Singh spoke of how Federal benefits such as CERB were inaccessible for many people with disabilities – prohibiting the most vulnerable from accessing funding. In the podcast, Singh states: "From the beginning of this pandemic, we said this should be available to anyone who needs it. That includes people living with disabilities. As we went through the pandemic and drew attention to the amount of money, we wanted to continue to fight for to get people the help they needed, we pointed out that people living with disabilities were ignored from the beginning." Singh also spoke of the DTC, calling the benefit inadequate as there would be more disabled Canadians who would not be able to qualify compared those who can. Singh said the government “failed to deliver help for people living with disabilities” (Raymond, 2020).

## **Provincial Programs, Benefits & Tax Credits**

Many provincial organizations that support people with disabilities have either temporarily paused all operations, are currently operating and trying to accommodate virtually, or received additional funding from the federal government to continue operations at full capacity while also accommodating online operations.

Some provincial organizations have surveyed their members and target users to understand the unique needs and challenges they have faced during these unusual times.

The information in this section is divided by geographic region and provides examples of organizations currently operating and providing accommodations for members and clients during COVID-19.

### **Pacific & Yukon Region**

The government of British Columbia has allocated \$3.5 million in financial assistance for students during COVID-19, as well as a one-time grant for students to alleviate the financial stress of the pandemic (Patterson, 2020). In addition, recently, post-secondary students with disabilities received new funding by the government of BC. As reported by the CBC, \$1.5 million will be distributed equally among 20 BC post-secondary institutions “to strengthen supports for students with cognitive, mental health or physical disabilities” (The Canadian Press, 2020). The article also states that the province is investing \$275,000 in [BCcampus](#) to support students, staff, and faculty for online resources and tools on well-being. Resources also include webinars on how to help individuals adapt to online learning, stress management, and financial supports. BC is also investing an additional \$400,000 “to support the development of more resources covering a wide range of courses and subjects in B.C.'s growing open textbook collection” (The Canadian Press, 2020).

### **Minister’s statement on guidelines for post-secondary institutions**

Melanie Mark, Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, released the following statement regarding the guidelines for reducing the risk of COVID-19 at post-secondary institutions in B.C.:

“I am pleased that the Go Forward Guidelines have been released. They will provide greater certainty to students, faculty and staff at our post-secondary institutions as they prepare for the fall 2020 semester during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines were developed by the post-secondary sector, with representatives from Indigenous educational groups, key student associations and major post-secondary labour organizations. They provide a minimum standard for both public and private institutions as they develop their own COVID-19 safety plans. They will include detailed policies, guidelines and procedures to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in their campus communities. They also include general guidance on everything from physical distancing, cleaning and hygiene practices, in-person and online course protocols, mental-health supports, student housing, campus pubs, childcare and research. The public expects that our institutions are places of innovation, and our government expects that each of B.C.’s 25 post-secondary institutions follow the amended health order on mass gatherings by the provincial health officer. The clarification allows for more in-person course delivery to ensure that everyone in B.C. has access to educational opportunities as close to home as possible. My ministry will work with the sector to achieve the earliest possible restoration of full service on our campuses to support economic recovery while following recommendations from the provincial health officer.”

Learn More:

The Go Forward Guidelines have been reviewed by the provincial health officer and WorkSafeBC and are available here:

PDF: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/institution-resources-administration/aest\\_postsecgoforwardguidelines.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/institution-resources-administration/aest_postsecgoforwardguidelines.pdf)

Webpage: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/institution-resources-administration/studying-during-covid-19>

Source: [BC Gov News](#)

[NEADS - Media](#)

**British Columbia Parents of Complex Kids** conducted a [survey](#) in collaboration with Family Support Institute, Inclusion BC and BCEdAccess to understand how COVID-19 is affecting families with child(ren) with disabilities. This survey was also created as a call for more funding from the Children and Youth with Special Needs (CYSN) in British Columbia, “and to hear about their experiences accessing emergency pandemic funding and/or services for their child or youth with disabilities through the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) CYSN program” (BCEdAccess, 2020). The survey was distributed by email and through social media, and was completed by 1,055 parents of children and youth with disabilities over two and a half days.

The survey report released on April 30, 2020 found that nearly 60% of families have not been able to access any MCFD emergency pandemic measures, as stated in the following [release](#). When asked if they were able to access the emergency pandemic measures, almost 70% of parents stated that those who had access to respite funds – aside from the emergency relief support fund – have not been able to use those funds during the pandemic. Asked to elaborate on respite funds, comments provided by parent respondents included:

*"I have wonderful care providers who are still willing to work for us. However, it's insanely expensive, as my son requires 2:1 supports to be safe (so \$45/hr for care)."*

*"Only 1 time it is a difficult thing and not sure if sending my son to respite is the correct thing to do regards social distancing, but need more than normal."*

*"Respite is provided through MFCD, paid directly to respite worker. Due to Covid we have no respite service and no access to the funds for any other help."*

*"No, we are so far down the waiting list that we don't have a chance. Were told somebody needs to move out of the area, age out and die before we will ever be able to access the funds and services from the ministry."*

Furthermore, asked what they currently need in terms of support during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents listed:

- clarity on how respite funds may be used
- culturally informed services
- financial support to cover expenses associated with my child's disability
- flexibility in use of funding (school age therapy, autism funding, behavioural consultant, counseling)
- mental health support
- regular communication and connection with a social worker
- to know whether I am eligible for any pandemic supports.

The BC Parents of Complex Kids, Family Support Institute, Inclusion BC and BCEdAccess have analyzed the needs of parents of children and youth with disabilities and have outlined recommendations for the MCFD and the CYSN on how to better support families during these unusual times. The organizations recommend:

1. Provide broad flexibility in the use of funds families received through different CYSN programs during the pandemic, following a family-centred approach.
2. Support the resilience of families by easing their financial burden. Provide \$525 per month (to be used at the family's discretion) for the next three months (May-June 2020) to support families to stay strong and together.
3. Clear communications:
  - Provide clear, written guidelines around emergency pandemic measures and supports;
  - Ensure effective, clear and responsive communication from social workers;
  - Publish explicit health and safety protocols based on recommendations from the Public Health Officer to allow families to access in-person supports.

4. Recognize the many families of children and youth with disabilities left out of the CYSN funding structure and provide them with financial and other types of support during the pandemic.
5. Work in collaboration with the Ministries of Finance and Social Development and Poverty Reduction to introduce the Child Opportunity Benefit earlier.

## **Prairies and Northern Region**

### **Saskatchewan**

#### **Emergency Aid Available for Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Students**

The Saskatchewan government will make up to \$1.5 million in emergency financial aid available to help at-risk post-secondary students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ministry of Advanced Education announced today it will help students with limited financial resources and supports whose studies and employment have been disrupted. The amount of emergency funding will depend on each students' circumstances.

"Our government is committed to helping students achieve their educational goals," Advanced Education Minister Tina Beaudry-Mellor said. "This is especially true during this unprecedented time, as some students are faced with limited supports. These resources will help quickly address some of their more pressing needs."

This financial adjustment for publicly-funded post-secondary institutions will support both domestic and international students in need through one-time emergency bursaries. The Ministry of Advanced Education will also work with publicly-funded institutions that do not have existing emergency financial aid programs for students to put emergency bursaries in place.

"We recognize the need for urgent supports to help vulnerable students, including those from northern, remote and indigenous communities, as well as international students unable to return home," Beaudry-Mellor said. "It is critical that we work with our institutions to help students who have nowhere else to turn."

Emergency bursaries for students will be available from April 1, 2020 to September 30, 2020. Eligibility requirements and application details will be available to students through their post-secondary educational institution within the next week to ten days, after details are finalized.

Adjustments may be made to the program once details of any federal assistance are announced.

For more information, contact:

Scott Brown  
Advanced Education  
Regina

Phone: 306-787-0355

Email: [scott.brown@gov.sk.ca](mailto:scott.brown@gov.sk.ca)

Cell: 306-527-6903

Source: [Saskatchewan Government news release April 9, 2020](#) (NEADS - Media)

The **Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability** (SAID) provides “income support for people with significant and enduring disabilities” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2020). Applicants must complete a Disability Impact Assessment to identify the presence of a significant and enduring disability, and must also:

- be a Saskatchewan resident, 18 years of age or older;
- lack financial resources to provide for your basic needs
- have significant and enduring disability that is permanent, impacts daily living activities, and result in a person requiring assistance in the form of an assistive device, assistance of another person, a service animal, or other accommodation

During the pandemic, SAID allowed clients extra time to hand in their reports required to collect income assistance.

Residents can [apply online](#) or contact their local [Income Assistance office](#). All SAID beneficiaries are supported by Assured Income Specialists working within 18 Ministry services across the province. Assured Income Specialists help beneficiaries fill out the application, provide planning support and referrals to other organizations that provide services, and help identify other ministry programs for which applicants might be eligible.

According to the SAID website, benefits include three main components:

1. **The Living Income:** a fixed amount of monthly income that allows beneficiaries the opportunity to make decisions and have more control over how to spend their income. Participants make decisions on how much to spend on shelter, food, basic transportation and other items.
2. **The Disability Income:** is designed to help with costs related to the impact of disability.
3. **The Exceptional Need Income:** helps individuals with a number of special circumstances. For example, additional income is available for clothing recommended by a health professional, special food items, food and grooming costs associated with service animals, and home care.

The website also includes a section stating that if an applicant is denied funding, they will receive a letter outlining the decision, and next steps for appealing the decision. Applicants have 15 days of being notified to appeal the decision.

## Alberta

The Government of Alberta provides a support program called [Family Support for Children with Disabilities \(FSCD\)](#), which “works with eligible families to provide support and services based on each child and family’s needs” (Government of Alberta, 2020). Applicants should contact the service office closest to their home.

Families must meet the following criteria to be eligible:

- Have a child with a disability who is under 18 years of age
- The child must be a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident
- The person applying for the program must be the parent or guardian for the child
- The child must live in Alberta.

Applications also follow a ‘disability criteria’ which involves medical documentation confirming that the child has a:

- Diagnosis for a disability that is due to a developmental, physical, sensory, mental or neurological condition or impairment; and/or
- Health condition that impacts their daily living activities such as eating, grooming, walking, interacting with others, playing and problem solving (Alberta.ca).

Read more about the services and supports, needs assessments, individualized family support plan [here](#). FSCD offers families:

- information about government programs and services, community supports and local resources
- help coordinating and getting supports and services
- help with clothing or footwear that relates to your child’s disability counselling
- help with some of the costs to take your child to medical appointments such as parking, mileage, meals, accommodation and sibling care
- respite services in or outside your home to give you a temporary break
- help from aides who provide personal care, community, behavioural or developmental support
- temporary living arrangements for your child away from home
- help with some costs for medications, prescribed diets, ambulance or medical supplies
- specialized services for children with severe disabilities
- the same FSCD worker assigned to a family with more than one eligible child
- help planning your child’s transition during key changes or life events such as when they:
  - are first diagnosed or the disability is identified
  - return home from the hospital
  - start an early intervention program
  - start a new school program

- approach age 16 and plan for adulthood.

While the FSCD services and programs are still accessible during the pandemic, some may have been modified. A [letter](#) was released notifying families of children with disabilities about some of these pandemic-related changes.. Please read the [Interim Family Support for Children with Disabilities \(FSCD\)](#) policies to know how these services have been affected.

## **Ontario**

### **NEADS Accessibility Resilience Program – Emergency Support for Students with Disabilities in Response to COVID-19**

COVID-19 has placed an undue burden on post-secondary students with disabilities (undergraduate university, graduate university, college, cégep, and high school students entering a post-secondary institution) who were already facing immense socio-cultural and operational accessibility challenges before the pandemic. Particular challenges include rising tuition fees and a lack of transitional support for online learning such as assistive technologies, devices, and software. To do our part to help address these challenges, the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) has put in place the Accessibility Resilience Program, with generous support from the Government of Canada's Supports for Student Learning Program through a contribution agreement, to deliver \$157,000 in disabled student emergency financial assistance.

There are two key components to this funding program:

- Emergency Relief Awards: a minimum of \$30,000 to increase the number of awards offered to disabled college and university students through the 2020 NEADS Student Awards Program. All applicants who applied to the 2020 program will be eligible and no further action is required.
- Emergency Relief Grants: A maximum of \$127,000 to college and university students with disabilities to facilitate recovery and account for any unforeseen costs related to rising tuition fees and the transition to online/remote learning. Application details below.

**The Emergency Relief Grants** will be given to 87 deserving post-secondary students with disabilities to help them recover and account for any unforeseen costs related to the transition to online/remote learning resulting from COVID-19. Grant types include:

- 77 grants with a maximum claim of \$1000
- 10 grants with a maximum claim of \$500.

Eligible costs would include, but are not limited to: tuition fees, devices, cables, assistive technology software, internet bills, ergonomic desk equipment, or any other costs related to accessing education online as a result of COVID-19.

For all eligible costs, excluding tuition fees, recipients are responsible for invoicing NEADS with their receipt of purchase and would be reimbursed for costs incurred. Tuition fees would not be reimbursed but instead be applied directly to your student account.

DISCLAIMER: Applicants must wait to receive confirmation from NEADS that they are an Emergency Relief Grant recipient, including the specified value of the grant so that they can purchase their item(s) for reimbursement. If an applicant purchases an item without receiving confirmation that they have been selected as a recipient, NEADS is not liable to cover these costs.

**To be eligible, applicants must:**

- be a Canadian citizen
- have a permanent disability
- be currently enrolled in or accepted into a post-secondary institution
- demonstrate COVID-19 impacts on their education
- demonstrate they have not had their needs met by other funding available from federal or provincial sources.

**Selection Process**

Once your application has been submitted, it will be reviewed for completeness and adherence to the above guidelines. Assuming all guidelines are met, selection committees will review applications based on the selection criteria described above. Due to the volume of applications received, only those selected to receive an award will be contacted. Recipients will be contacted by **mid**-January 2021.

For any inquiries pertaining to the application process please contact Lauren Gravis, Director of NEADS Student Awards at: [etes@neads.ca](mailto:etes@neads.ca) or our National Office.

Deadline: December 1, 2020 ([NEADS - Media](#)).

**Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education: Lessons from the pandemic and recommendations Jackie Pichette, Sarah Brumwell and Jessica Rizk, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario**

The sudden shift to remote learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has important implications for accessibility in postsecondary education. A new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that, on average, more students with disabilities reported experiencing challenges once their education moved entirely online than students without disabilities. While many of these challenges for learning are not new, the study shows that they have been amplified by the pandemic.

These challenges included uncertainty about course expectations and how to access support; difficulty focusing, staying on top of readings and assignments, and issues understanding course material; inadequate access to accommodations and accessible material; difficulty communicating and building or sustaining relationships; inequitable access to, and problematic assumptions about, technology and internet; and inaccessible assessments. Additionally, the study shows students who may not have previously identified as having an accessibility need have recently found themselves facing challenges and are now in need of support or accommodations.

To help address these challenges, the report offers several recommendations for improving accessible learning beginning in the fall 2020 semester. These include:

- Incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in all courses
- Empowering students to make choices that suit their needs
- Enabling transferable skill development
- Creating certainty where you can
- Sharing information about how to access services and accommodations remotely
- Finding ways to facilitate engagement and meaningful interaction
- Checking in with students
- Recording synchronous lectures and being mindful that chat tools can be distracting
- Protecting immunocompromised students when in-person courses resume
- Practicing empathy

Some of the students engaged in the research identified positive changes that took place in response to the pandemic and were optimistic these would continue into the fall 2020 semester and beyond. Students highlighted the increased flexibility and choice, fewer physical, sensory, and for some, social barriers, anonymity navigating accommodations and services and innovative, inclusive pedagogy as bright spots of the shift to remote learning.

The study was based on a student survey administered by Academica Group between May and June of 2020 to postsecondary students enrolled in courses during the winter 2020 semester. Approximately 200 of the 623 respondents have a self-reported disability. The survey asked students how their recent remote learning experiences compared, positively or negatively, to their pre-pandemic in-person and online learning experiences. HEQCO also surveyed over 70 disability support staff at Ontario colleges and universities in July 2020, and interviewed more than 30 student representatives, instructors and staff between May and July of 2020.

Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education: Lessons from the pandemic and recommendations was written by Jackie Pichette, Sarah Brumwell and Jessica Rizk, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Read the full report [here](#).

Source: [Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario \(NEADS - Media\)](#)

**Independent Living Canada** conducted a [survey](#) asking participants – people with disabilities, staff, and volunteers within the organization’s 24 Independent Living Centres across Canada – about their concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Of 325 respondents, almost 50% identified as individuals with disabilities. The study identified that people with disabilities were more likely than their workers or volunteers to be concerned about health threats or social isolation posed by COVID-19. Most notably, over 91% of respondents “were concerned about being infected by the coronavirus, with 60% of this group stating they were very concerned” (Independent Living, 2020). Common pandemic concerns noted by respondents include:

- Not having access to Personal Protective Equipment
- Not having the right or ability to be immediately tested for having COVID-19.

Not receiving the same level of medical treatment if they were to be hospitalized for COVID-19.

- Not being consulted like others about being treated for COVID-19
- Being more socially isolated than ever before

- Thinking that if a choice were to be made as to who lives or dies because of COVID-19, “I, as a person with a disability, will be chosen to die.”

The study noted that two thirds of those who are disabled were concerned about not being able to get food and groceries as efficiently as before the pandemic. Another concern was not having enough money during the pandemic to buy food or pay rent. Respondents also provided commentary on how they felt regarding the pandemic and how they are affected by it. Two respondents stated:

“...according to the government we don’t exist in their eyes; only give it to people you want to give it to is not fair. I’m on a low income just barely making it so where is the help?”

“There’s help for everyone except us. People with disabilities matter too! Food is so expensive now that I have to choose to pay rent or buy food. Government should help us that have disabilities that can’t afford to live” (Independent Living, 2020).

Find the PDF version of the survey [here](#), and the word document [here](#).

**Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada** teamed up with the MS Data Alliance (MSDA) and their members to start a program called the Global Data Sharing Initiative to help those with MS during COVID-19.

It also provides a ‘[Global COVID-19 advice for people with MS](#)’ guide to provide advice for those with MS on how to reduce their risk of infection, disease modifying therapies (DMTs) work for suppressing or modifying the immune systems, and advise on other therapies to reduce the risk of the COVID-19 infection.

The guide states that, “All people with MS are advised to follow World Health Organization guidelines for reducing the risk of infection with COVID-19. People in the higher risk groups should pay particular attention to these measures. We recommend to:

- Practise social distancing by keeping at least 1.5 metres\* distance between yourself and others, to reduce your risk of infection when they cough, sneeze or speak. This is particularly important when indoors but applies to being outdoors as well.
- Make wearing a mask a normal part of being around other people and ensure that you are using it correctly by following these instructions.
- Avoid going to crowded places, especially indoors. Where this is not possible, ensure to wear a mask and practise social distancing.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub (70% alcohol content is considered most effective).
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth unless your hands are clean.
- When coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or tissue.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces frequently especially those which are regularly touched.

- Talk to your healthcare provider about optimal care plans, through video consultations or in-person visits where needed. Visits to health clinics and hospitals should not be avoided if they are recommended based on your current health needs.
- Stay active and try to take part in activities that will enhance your mental health and well-being. Physical exercise and social activities that can take place outside and with social distancing are encouraged.
- Get the seasonal flu vaccination where it is available and encourage your family to do the same.

Caregivers and family members who live with, or regularly visit, a person with MS in one of the higher risk groups should also follow these recommendations to reduce the chance of bringing COVID-19 infection into the home” (Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, 2020).

Data is still being collected by the Global Data Initiative (GDI) and is not yet available. The GDI webpage states that efforts are underway in a number of countries to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 in people with MS. Many existing MS registries are developing COVID-19 protocols to gather information from clinicians, people with MS, or both. The GDI will enable these independent efforts to combine data in a central global platform. Consolidating data from many countries will enable faster answers, which will help save lives. Learn more about the Global Data Sharing Initiative, [here](#).

Find out more about the project and how you can get involved at [www.msif.org/covid19data](http://www.msif.org/covid19data)

**Ontario Brain Injury Association (OBIA)** shared a five-part series of infographics on [Learning Needs of Children with Disabilities During COVID-19](#) for parents, teachers and professionals. As stated on their website, “Although the information was developed for students during the uncertain times during the pandemic, the information provided may be of benefit for anyone who feels overwhelmed while learning online” (Ontario Brain Injury Association, 2020). Audio and visual tips are provided in part 1 of the series, including:

- Teachers should ensure high quality audio and video when choosing videos online or when creating their own videos.
- Provide an audio description of what is occurring in videos.
- Make a transcript of your video or lesson available.
- Offer on-screen controls for those with vision impairments.

In part 2, tips are offered on creating structure and routine to support the learning needs of students with disabilities during COVID-19:

- For the online classroom:
  - Each online lesson should change in content but follow the same framework each time;
  - Provide students with visual schedules to help them visualize how their lesson will be structured.

- The at-home learning environment:
  - The child should have a designated workspace within the home that is catered to each student’s specific needs (sensory, movement, etc.);
  - Use as many visual supports as possible (i.e., posting a visual schedule of their day).

Part 3 explores behavioural tips to ensure effective communication between child, parent(s), teachers, and health care professionals:

- For teachers
  - Assist parents with non-academic goals such as self-regulation (how to regulate controlling one’s behaviours, thoughts, and emotions), communication skills, and decision making. Role-playing scenarios for children and parents at home can be a great learning strategy;
  - School staff and supporting team members should communicate to parents what strategies worked at school so they can use them in the home (e.g., visuals, verbal cues, etc.)
- For Parents:
  - Have daily check-ins with your child on their emotional well-being and how they are coping during this time;
  - Communicate with teachers on what supportive equipment/materials can be provided at home.

Part 4 focuses on handling stress and fostering resilience in children around daily routines and structures within school and home life, which may have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. It also provides “warning signs” of how stress may look like in children in various ages. Advice includes:

- What can stress look like in young children (toddlers)?
  - Sleep disruption (nightmares, not sleeping through the night, feeling more tired);
  - Regression in behaviour.
- What can stress look like in school-aged children?
  - Withdrawal from family and friends (turning down opportunities for connection with friends and family);
  - Increased emotional dis-regulation.
- What can stress look like in adolescents?
  - Changes in sleep and/or appetite;
  - Isolation from family and friends (withdrawn).
- What can we do to foster resilience in children?
  - Foster supportive and responsive relationships;
  - Prioritize physical and emotional health;
  - Strengthen regulation skills;
  - Reduce exposure to stress;

- Develop and foster hope.

Part 5 is about fostering resilience in children to promote mental health during the pandemic. Tips include:

- Foster supportive and responsive relationships:
  - Make time for consistent points of connections with your child (i.e., eating a meal as a family, time spent connecting with family over the phone, reading together before bed);
  - Find ways to connect even if physically apart such as using technology or writing letters.
- Prioritize physical and emotional health:
  - Physical health:
    - make time for movement (family walks, stretching, dancing, playing)
    - prioritize good sleep hygiene (e.g., minimizing screen time before bed, not watching the news before bed)
  - emotional health:
    - stick to routines; if you don't have any, create some. Routines establish "normalcy" which is important in the midst of significant change
    - model a healthy expression of emotion.
- Strengthen regulation skills:
  - Increase emotional literacy;
  - Engage in mindful practices.
- Reduce exposure to stress:
  - Limit media exposure;
  - Share age-appropriate information regarding COVID-19.
- Develop and foster hope:
  - Adopt a gratitude practice;
  - Engage in "care-mongering";
  - Become helpers.

## Quebec

**Moelle épinière et motricité Québec** (MÉMO-Qc), held an [in-house survey](#) focused on disabled individuals and COVID-19, and the systems in place meant to help vulnerable populations. Of 901 respondents, 30% felt a deterioration in the access to health care and social services, 22% felt less secure, and 23% felt depressed and stressed.

Of the 30% who responded that they felt a deterioration in health care and social services, 4% said they perceived a significant deterioration of these systems. However, 60% did not notice a change in health care and social services at all. "We cannot ignore the complexity behind the issue of access to health care and social services, that is to say the existence of gaps in the availability of services from the health network well before the start of the pandemic," said

Walter Zelaya, Director General of MÉMO-Qc. “The absence of change does not mean a satisfactory health and social services system” (Moelle épinière et motricité Québec (MÉMO-Qc) , 2020).

The release (linked above) sharing the survey results also states that:

“30% of complete tetraplegics feel less secure than before the pandemic, while for all respondents this percentage is 22%. For her part, Virginie Archambault, research and liaison officer at MÉMO-Qc suggests that ‘the greater home support needs associated with complete tetraplegia could explain this higher percentage, in particular due to the fear of transmission of the disease. COVID-19 by care workers.’”

MEMO Qc also wanted to probe the contribution of those around people with disabilities. In this regard, respondents stress the importance of their spouse, children, friends and even neighbors on their overall wellbeing, particularly in the context of a pandemic. 90% said they had the support of their loved ones.

## **Post-Secondary Initiatives**

When pandemic measures were first enacted in Canada in March 2020, , post-secondary institutions across Canada, following recommendations of public health officials and governments, elected to close down campus operations and move to learning online. This sudden move from on-campus learning to virtual left instructors and students alike trying to adapt to a new reality.

The shift to online presented technological barriers for many students, with students with disabilities who require additional learning accommodations often feeling the effects of the technological barriers to a higher degree. As issues have been raised around asynchronous learning, live captioning and (American Sign Language) ASL, the use of plain language, and more, new methods have been adopted to support accessible education for students with disabilities.

However, difficulties continue to make themselves known in a number of aspects of the post-secondary educational systems, such as exam standards. This section analyzes various university/college accessibility centres, their support staffs, and accommodations that have been put in place for students. In addition, NEADS distributed a mass email via Access ED-U Electronic List server to post-secondary Accessibility Centres across Canada regarding their operations during COVID-19. Responses received to the questions asked in this email are included throughout this section.

This section looks at the operations and administrative services of post-secondary institutions, how accessibility centres are providing accommodations for students, and shares additional

pandemic-related resources provided for students. It is organized into Universities and Colleges, with regional breakdowns of institutions in each category.

## Universities

Universities were amongst some of the first institutions and infrastructures in Canada to respond to social distancing and other restrictions, by shutting down and moving classes online. This left students unsure of what their education might look like in the future. The spring and summer 2020 terms provided a glimpse into a new reality of virtual learning, and some students – especially those with disabilities – found the changes quite inaccessible.

L'Association québécoise pour l'équité et l'inclusion au postsecondaire (AQEIPS), in collaboration with NEADS, conducted a [webinar](#) titled "Consultation avec étudiant.e.s en situation de handicap sur les cours à distance.", Asked how students with disabilities are handling online learning, one student responded: "Online learning outs me as a learner within the virtual environment. I feel overwhelmed by it and quite fatigued quite quickly, and feel ultra-apprehensive about communications, because I cannot see the people around me whom I'm speaking/communicating with. So, I'm much more hesitant to speak without having people's body language to help me adjust my communication to the setting and read the room."

Other students and teachers participating in the webinar shared similar experiences around the barriers of online learning. Many universities have acknowledged such barriers, and are attempting to remedy the situation to enable accessible learning for all.

## Pacific & Yukon Region

Simon Fraser University (SFU), in Burnaby, British Columbia, created a series of resources to aid students, and students with disabilities, with the shift toward online learning. For all students, SFU Health and Counselling Services (HCS) launched an online support program. The [SFU blog](#) states:

"We had to pivot quickly and thoughtfully," says Yuna Chen, acting associate director of health promotion. "Our department normally hosts about 20 programs and events over the semester, so we want to ensure that we continue to support SFU students by understanding their current needs and collaborating with other departments" (Saghah, 2020).

Over the span of a month, HCS created new programming for students through the Zoom conference platform. With the virtual meeting space, HCS "launched four new virtual events,

and relaunched three continuing programs. The department continues to add new events to its roster every week” (Saghah, 2020). To learn about more HCS programs and events, click [here](#).

SFU’s WOSK Centre for Dialogue released a tip sheet on how educators can acknowledge the ways online learning can create barriers for accessibility. [Tipsheet for Accessibility and Equity in Online Engagement during COVID-19](#) identifies possible barriers, provides educators questions to ask students about experiencing barriers in their learning, and offers potential strategies to remedy these barriers and ensure better access to learning for students with disabilities.

One example of a barrier explored considered the accessibility of online learning for those with lower levels of digital media literacy and/or for students who are deaf and deaf/hard of hearing (to include real-time captioning and American Sign Language, as required), whether content is accessible for those who are blind/low vision, whether engagement is accessible for those with speech impairments, and if the content is accessible for students who are not fluent in the language used. Strategies suggested range from combining multiple modes of communication (text, audio, visual/graphics), using plain language and limited jargon, ensuring digital materials are accessible for screen readers, as well as incorporating ASL and live captioning.

## **Prairies and Northern Region**

### **Alberta**

During the pandemic, **Athabasca University** in Edmonton is providing [free assistive technology](#) for students with disabilities. As student and staff are unable to access a computer lab, library, or workplace software due to pandemic restrictions, this initiative has provided access to software such as VFO-JAWS, ZoomText and Fusion. The software [Kurzweil 3000](#) – a platform the supports students in reading, note-taking, studying, writing, and test taking – is currently available for download for students and staff. Athabasca University also has Read & Write available for students and staff to activate as a trial with an Athabasca University email. For more information about Athabasca University assistive technology, click [here](#).

**The University of Alberta, Augustana campus** provides a list of financial assistance available for students with disabilities. These initiatives are not pandemic related, but the listed grants, loans and awards are still intended help students in need, including federal and provincial sources of funding. The [types of grants](#) provided on the university’s website includes:

#### **Canada Student Grant for Permanent Disabilities (CSG-PD)**

The CSG-PD provides up to \$2,000 per loan year (\$1,000 per term) to be used for educational and living costs. This grant can reduce the amount you owe on your student loan by up to \$2000/year and can add up to significant savings over time.

#### **First time CSG-PD applicants**

The following items must be submitted together:

- A completed hard copy loan application.
- Documentation of disability/medical condition. The documentation must contain specific information regarding diagnosis, symptoms, permanency, and functional impact of disability in the academic environment.
- A "Schedule 4" form, completed and signed by a SAS Accessibility Advisor.

If you are a dependent student (under 22 years of age, with at least one of your parents living in Alberta and/or have been out of high school for less than four years), are married or common law, you must submit a "Schedule 1" form that has been completed by you and your parents/spouse.

#### **If you have previously received the CSG-PD**

The CSG-PD will be automatically disbursed to you when you re-apply for student loans the following academic year.

#### **Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Persons with Permanent Disabilities (CSG-SE)**

This grant provides up to \$20,000 per loan year to fund accessibility-related supports and services required to support your academic success.

#### **First time CSG-SE applicants**

The following items must be submitted together:

- Documentation of disability/medical condition.
- A cost outline of accessibility-related services you are eligible to receive in the upcoming academic term(s). The cost outline is completed by the Accessibility Advisor and must be submitted to Student Aid prior to the start of the term or very early in the term.
- A "Schedule 4 form", completed and signed by a SAS Accessibility Advisor.

Once the grant application has been approved, you will receive a cheque for the approved amount of the grant. This cheque will be clearly marked "Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities" and will be accompanied by a Notice of Assessment letter. Please read the letter carefully and make sure you set this money aside to cover the cost of your disability-related accommodations and/or adaptive technology. The grant money cannot be used for any other purpose and you must submit receipts showing that the grant issued to you was used for the purpose it was requested. Receipts should be sent to Students Finance by the end of the academic year.

***The CSG-PD and CSG-SE may be submitted together when support/service costs have been determined the CSG-PD is ready for submission.***

### **Grant for Disabled Students (GFD)**

Eligibility criteria is the same as CSG-SE and can be accessed when a student does not have Canada Student Loan eligibility and their study period is more than 12 weeks.

A student that has a calculated need of zero or is a recipient of AISH may be considered for services and /or equipment expenses through the GFD.

- Maximum entitlement per academic year, if you are only eligible for GFD, is \$3,000.
- If you are eligible for the CSG-SE, you can additionally access GFD for Spring & Summer attendance.

Once the grant application has been approved, you will receive a cheque for the approved amount of the grant. This cheque will be clearly marked "Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities" and will be accompanied by a Notice of Assessment letter. Please read the letter carefully and make sure you set this money aside to cover the cost of your disability-related accommodations and/or adaptive technology. The grant money cannot be used for any other purpose and you must submit receipts showing that the grant issued to you was used for the purpose it was requested. Receipts should be sent to Students Finance by the end of the academic year along with any remaining funds.

## **Manitoba**

**Brandon University** has added a section to their [Student Accessibility Services \(SAS\)](#), called [Accommodating Students with Disabilities Online](#), to ensure both faculty and students continue to receive academic accommodations. Suggested accommodations listed include:

- **Recording of lectures:** Professors and other teaching staff are asked to consider recording online lectures and providing the recording for all students. This allows all students to go back and replay portions of a lecture, should they need repeated or clarification.
  - Zoom has a video capture feature. You could record and provide to all students to ensure access.
- **Captioning (specifically for students with hearing loss):** YouTube has speech recognition technology that automatically creates captions for your videos. While the quality of the captions may vary, it is a quick and cost-free option. When closed captions are available, you'll see CC next to the progress bar in the video player (on a web browser).
- **Format:** Consider that all online materials need to be accessible for all types of students (ie. visually impaired).
  - Text equivalents for everything (ie. image descriptions for photos, graphics, etc.)
  - Avoid images of text!

- **Participation** Please consider relaxing (or eliminating) participation and attendance policies during this time of uncertainty for students.
- **PowerPoints or lecture notes:** Provide in advance when delivering an online lecture.

SAS is still operating to ensure test/exam accommodation for students, as in-person monitoring is not possible at the moment to ensure the health and safety of staff and students. Test/exam accommodations include:

#### **Extra time**

- For students who require additional time to complete tests/exams, you will need to ensure that this time is provided. Some students require time and a half (1.5x) while others are approved for double time (2x). These details can be found in a student's accommodation letter e-mailed to you from Michelle Magnusson during the term.
- If you are providing the final exam in Moodle, here are the procedures:
  - To allow more time for students accessing the "Quiz Tool" on Moodle you want to duplicate the first quiz when it is completed. Then you want to add a password to the new quiz in the quiz settings and change the time settings to allow the additional time. You will instruct the students who need the additional time to access only the appropriately labelled second "Quiz" and only give them the password.
  - If you are using the Gradebook to calculate your final mark, you will want to create a "Category" and place the two quizzes in it. Within the Category settings you will specify that Moodle should take the highest grade out of the two quizzes only.
  - Please feel free to contact Glen Gross (grossg@brandonu.ca) directly with any further questions.
- It is important to maintain student confidentiality. When creating tests/exams for accommodated students, rather than label "Sally test," label "Version 2." Privately send the alternate time or formatted version to the individual student.

#### **Breaks During Tests/Exams**

- Breaks from class during exams is an accommodation that may have online, timed implications. A student may have extended time or they may have extended time plus "breaks" or class time plus "breaks."
- If the student has breaks during exams, add in their total break time to their exam, if there is no way for the student to stop and start.

#### **Use of Text-to-Speech**

- For students who require the use of Read & Writing or text-to-speech software, the student will have this software already installed on their computer, however, you must ensure the platform is compatible with Read & Write.
- Moodle is compatible; we are checking whether Top Hat is compatible.

#### **Use of a Scribe (due to physical limitations)**

- This accommodation will be arranged by the student, faculty member and SAS on an individual basis.

For students who are blind or visually impaired, SAS provides the following accommodations and advice:

- Please read aloud all text and provide a description of any images used in a live synchronous or recorded asynchronous presentation or lecture (e.g. PowerPoint, videos, webcasts, images, tables, graphs, etc.).
- Chats and discussion boards are accessible to screen readers. Some students will be using phones and apps which have different access features. Please check in with your students to be sure they are able to use these features and if not consider modifying the mechanism of group communication.
- Scanned text (articles, textbook pages, etc.) should be clear copies scanned in a straight vertical orientation.
- As a courtesy all participants in synchronous classes should identify themselves by name prior to speaking.

SAS provides the following accommodations for students who are hearing impaired:

- When speaking, face students/screen; avoid backlighting and remain in one place.
- Do not stand in front of a window when speaking as it is difficult for the student to read lips due to light behind the professor.
- Speak normally; exaggeration makes listening and lip reading difficult.
- Speak at a reasonable pace, clearly and in a normal tone.
- Use or refer students to visuals as much as possible.
- Signal the beginning of a new train of thought.
- Summarize important points.
- Repeat questions and/or answers.
- Take time after class periodically to make sure the student understands what is going on in class.
- Sometimes information needs to be rephrased for the student's understanding rather than repeated only.
- Use closed captioned videos when possible.
- Eliminate background noise and other distractions.

## Saskatchewan

**The University of Saskatchewan** is providing emergency funding for all students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic via donations made to the [Nasser Family Emergency Student Trust](#). According to the website:

“Your gift to the Nasser Family Emergency Student Trust provides funding to students experiencing financial and personal crises as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your support today will help students purchase the necessary equipment to complete their studies remotely;

assist with personal health or medical emergencies; and help cover the basic necessities of food and shelter during this challenging time.

Students are extremely grateful for the support of a fund such as the Nasser Family Emergency Student Trust. Your gift provides relief for both undergraduate and graduate students facing challenging financial and personal circumstances during this time of uncertainty. Thank you for your support.”

Donations are still being accepted to help students in need.

## Ontario

**Ryerson University** is permanently moving certain student services online in response to the pandemic. In the *Ryerson Today* article, [“These student services will adapt permanently as a result of COVID-19”](#), when the university closed down in mid-March due the pandemic, Ryerson’s Student Wellbeing Centre quickly adapted to the new regulations and began to offer their services – such as medical and counselling services, and academic accommodation – virtually to accommodate remote learning.

Ryerson’s Academic Accommodation Support and Test Centre provides a dedicated section concerning the needs of students with disabilities:

COVID-19 and the move to online learning posed a series of challenges specific to students with disabilities, as the team at the Academic Accommodation Support (AAS) office acknowledged when services were required to shift. “While we often think about distance education as more accessible than in-person instruction, a virtual environment can also present a new set of barriers for a variety of students,” said AAS team member Sydney Tran. The AAS team, including the Test Centre, worked in partnership with faculty to keep learning accessible for all AAS registrants (over 10 per cent of Ryerson's student population). AAS was able to shift to a completely virtual model of support, while developing enriched programming and resources for students and instructors. “We aimed to not only address gaps in knowledge and skills, but also targeted students' acute need for community in challenging times,” Tran said. “AAS students reported that the AAS STRIVE Online program helped them to feel “the most connected they've felt” since the pandemic response began.” The STRIVE Online program is an online adaptation of the in-person program of the same name. It offers drop-in learning strategy and assistive technology support for students with disabilities. “This small group program provides a space for students to experience connectedness in an inclusive environment, while working through solutions to the unique challenges presented by online learning,” said Tran. To help support ongoing online offerings to students, AAS will launch a new website, which will include information about STRIVE Online, for the fall 2020 semester (*Ryerson Today*, 2020).

## Atlantic Region

The Dalhousie Accessibility Centre provided the following responses to questions regarding their current service offerings at **Dalhousie University** in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

**Q:** What are the current operations of your accessibility centre?

**A:** Dalhousie's Student Accessibility Centre is closed. However, staff are available to support students remotely. Our Assistive Technology lending library remains available with equipment available for pick-up or delivery – geographical restrictions may apply.

**Q:** Have you hosted any virtual events? (i.e. providing community-based initiatives for students with disabilities)

**A:** Each year, the Student Accessibility Centre hosts a daylong in-person orientation for students with disabilities and a half day for family and friends. This year, we have offered a combination of live and recorded sessions to students. Our concluding session will take place tomorrow, live, with students and their family/friends. We are also developing programming for the fall specifically for students with Autism navigating the online environment.

**Q:** How were you able to accommodate students with disabilities virtually?

**A:** The Student Accessibility Centre holds student appointments by phone or through an online platform (e.g. MS Teams). Our processes have not changed in terms of how we are accommodating students – just the medium. We continue to work with professors and within other guidelines dictated by the pandemic.

**Q:** Were there any additional resources created for students with disabilities during the pandemic? (i.e. financial support, mental health support, ways to work online)

**A:** A number of resources were created for all students and housed on our Learning Management System in the winter, spring/summer terms (Brightspace). A new site has been created which is a landing place directing students to a host of resources for this fall: [https://www.dal.ca/academics/online\\_learning.html](https://www.dal.ca/academics/online_learning.html)

**Q:** Are there any current obstacles your post-secondary accessibility centre is currently facing, or may face in the beginning of the fall semester?

**A:** Volume is always a concern as students, despite our advice to connect in the summer, often wait until the start of the term.

**Q:** Do you anticipate implementing any changes or plans, for the winter semester that differ from the measures taken in the fall semester?

**A:** Any changes or plans will be dictated by the University's response to the pandemic.

The manager of **Memorial University's** Blundon Centre (Accessibility Services), Jason Geary, provided the following answers to questions about their operations during COVID-19.

**Q:** What are the current operations of your accessibility centre?

**A:** Our Accessibility Centre is completely open and operational, albeit remote. We are meeting with students and instructors via WebEx videoconferencing.

**Q:** Have you hosted any virtual events? (i.e. providing community-based initiatives for students with disabilities)

**A:** Yes. We are offering weekly webinars for students. We have also offered many webinars for families and students transitioning to Memorial University for the fall.

**Q:** How were you able to accommodate students with disabilities virtually?

**A:** Yes. We have followed our prescribed registration process virtually using phone calls and videoconferencing software.

**Q:** Were there any additional resources created for students with disabilities during the pandemic? (i.e. financial support, mental health support, ways to work online)

**A:** There wasn't anything added from our particular unit, but the institution continued to offer students at Memorial access to financial supports, and mental health supports, virtually.

**Q:** Are there any current obstacles your post-secondary accessibility centre is currently facing, or may face in the beginning of the fall semester?

**A:** While there are students who will prefer and thrive studying remotely, we are aware that there are students who simply prefer to not study online or from a distance and will therefore face the difficult decision to not study at Memorial while remote studies are enacted.

We will also face challenges with assisting students and instructors with navigating accommodations that will look different during remote instruction. There are many accommodations for example (e.g., exam accommodations) that students will now be responsible for self-accommodating in their homes, apartments and condos.

**Q:** Do you anticipate implementing any changes or plans, for the winter semester that differ from the measures taken in the fall semester?

**A:** As we proceed through this period of primarily remote instruction, we will continue to improve and think critically about how we are providing service provision. We feel strongly that the processes and procedures we have in place now can work as long as remote instruction remains the primary mode of delivering courses. We are always, however, looking for ways to improve and enhance our services.

## **Colleges**

### **Pacific and Yukon Region**

#### **British Columbia**

**The British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) [Accessibility Services](#)** Centre has moved all their services online due to the pandemic. Communications have been moved to phone appointments, virtual meetings, and e-mail conversations. Students' instructors and Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist at Accessibility Services should communicate about changes needed to coordinate a student's accommodations.

Faculty must contact Accessibility Services to speak with a Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist regarding:

- how to arrange face-to-face accommodations in the online environment for students with disabilities;
- how they and their students who may be experiencing new barriers related to online learning can be supported;
- how course design and the disability intersect in each case.

**Capilano College** provides an [emergency bursary fund](#) for students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. All emergency bursaries are:

- non-repayable;
- provided to address short-term, unplanned and unexpected financial hardship;
- not designed to meet educational costs common to all students, such as tuition fees;
- approved on a case-by-case basis;
- dependent upon availability of funds.

The emergency bursary is available to International students as well. The emergency bursary page asks applicants to:

1. Download, save and complete the fillable application, Emergency Bursary Application – Fall 2020 (PDF)
2. Answer all questions carefully. Incomplete applications will not be processed
3. Read, sign and date the 'Applicant Declaration'
4. Attach supporting documentation related to your sudden and unexpected financial emergency (e.g. receipts, proof of loss of employment, two recent paystubs, etc.)
5. Using your CapU student email account, email your completed application and electronic copies of your supporting documentation to [finaid@capilanou.ca](mailto:finaid@capilanou.ca).

## **Prairies & Northern Region**

### **Alberta**

The **Bow Valley College** [Services for Students with Disabilities](#) is advocating for a Universal Learning Design (ULD) to provide more learning strategies for students and staff alike during the COVID-19 pandemic. The college states:

“We encourage instructors to incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in the design of curriculum and classes as this decreases the need for individual accommodations and increases access and engagement for all learners. UDL is a framework to improve and optimize teaching that eliminates barriers through initial design and instruction rather than overcoming barriers later, through individual accommodations” (Bow Valley College, 2020)

The college also provides an explanation of [UDL at a glance](#). UDL guides the framework and “design of instructional goals, assessments, methods and materials that can be and adjusted to meet individual needs” (About Universal Design for Learning, 2020). It recognizes and [represents](#) the various ways of learning, and provides direction on how content can be [engaging](#) and [strategic](#) in allowing students to express their knowledge. UDL has been in existence since the 1990’s and its usage is now being heavily advocated as the best method of online education – providing accommodations for all students with various disabilities.

Bow Valley College also provides a list of resources for students in need of financial aid during COVID-19. The [list of external resources](#) provides links to aid related to food and basic needs; job protection, employment standards, and future employment opportunities; people with disabilities; Indigenous resources; International student resources, and many other resources.

At **Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)** in Edmonton, the [Learning Services Centre](#) provides a list of [online learning resources](#) to aid in the remote delivery of learning, as well as in creating new digital content for students and staff. NAIT Learning Services has created an [online learning module](#) “about how online learning is unique, what it takes to be a successful online learner, and how you can stay connected and motivated in this format” (Learning Services, 2020). The module has eight lessons designed to help students with online learning and provides strategies to navigate this new virtual environment.

## Manitoba

Winnipeg’s **Red River College** published an update in their April 2020 [newsletter](#) regarding the current status of their Accessibility Centre during COVID-19. The newsletter states:

“On August 31, online course delivery begins for the Fall term. Some blended delivery for targeted academic programs will begin as well. Limited on-campus activity will take place, with a focus on hands-on learning and industry training activities.

Accessibility Services is committed to providing reasonable academic accommodations to students with disabilities for all RRC classes, including those delivered in an online format.

### **Students New to RRC Accessibility Services**

If you are not yet registered with Accessibility Services, and would like to request accommodations, please [make an appointment with a counsellor](#).

Please see below regarding our medical documentation requirements.

#### Current Students

If you are already registered with Accessibility Services and would like to request a telephone or online meeting with your counsellor, **please email your counsellor directly** or contact Jennifer at [jgaulin@rrc.ca](mailto:jgaulin@rrc.ca) or Naomi at [nkruse30@rrc.ca](mailto:nkruse30@rrc.ca).

### **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services**

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services will continue to provide ASL-English interpreting and computerized note taking for courses offered on-campus as well as through online delivery. To book an interpreter, please complete the [booking form](#).

For more information, please contact Jill Patterson via email [jpatterson@rrc.ca](mailto:jpatterson@rrc.ca) or call 204-795-2331.

### **Exam Accommodations**

Students currently eligible for exam accommodations are encouraged to review the [webpage](#) for detailed information on how exam accommodations are being delivered for online/alternate delivery of courses.

### **Assistive Technology and Alternate Format Material**

For assistance with assistive technology and alternate format material, please contact [Erica Ament](#), Assistive Technologist.

### **Medical Documentation and COVID-19**

Students requesting academic accommodations are required to submit current medical documentation supporting their request. Please see the [Disability Documentation Guide](#) for detailed information.

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the government has generally requested that organizations in the Province not stretch our health care system by requesting medical notes. As a result, **on a temporary basis** students will **not need to provide new or updated medical documentation** from their healthcare provider(s) for the sole purpose of supporting an accommodation request.

During this time, students should provide any medical documentation that may be available (medical report, high school IEP, letter from previous college/university). Additional documentation can be supplied at a later time. The approval of accommodations not based on current medical information may be granted on a **temporary basis only**.

### **Students should note the following:**

When restrictions are lifted, the College reserves the right to:

1. Request that students provide updated medical information;
2. Review any new information and determine what accommodations are supported; and
3. Offer appropriate accommodations based on the medical information, even if they are different than the temporary accommodations a student received during the pandemic" (Red River College, 2020).

## **Ontario**

**Georgian College** developed a \$1 million [COVID-19 Hardship Bursary](#) for all students affected by the pandemic. The bursary will be split equally among domestic and international students who are enrolled in the institution's full-time programs for the summer 2020 semester and are in urgent financial need. The newsletter announcing the bursary states:

"We fully recognize the financial pressure our students may have experienced as a direct result of COVID-19 and we are committed to supporting them in completing their semester successfully," says Dr. MaryLynn West-Moynes, President and CEO, Georgian College. "During this pandemic, post-secondary institutions play a critical role in supporting not only our students, but our communities too. Each one of our students have individual goals, and we are dedicated to helping them reach those goals and producing talented graduates that contribute to a stronger economy and society" (Georgian College, 2020).

The bursary is intended to provide short-term student relief with basic necessities such as housing costs, utilities or technology required to complete their program. This bursary is offered in addition to the [Georgian College emergency fund](#). More than \$80,000 has been distributed to international students through the bursary, and close to \$2 million has been distributed to domestic students in combination with other funding programs. Georgian College has also provided student supports, such as counselling, and remote technical and academic assistance. The college has also loaned more than 200 laptops to students to help complete their academic terms. [Applications for the COVID-19 Hardship Bursary](#) are still available.

[Loyalist College of Applied Arts and Technology](#) provides resources for online learning for students with disabilities. This includes making learning technologies accessible and free for students, as well as providing [strategies for online courses](#).

## **Atlantic Region**

### **Newfoundland and Labrador**

**The College of the North Atlantic** provides a [COVID-19 Bursary Application](#), which asks students various eligibility questions regarding their current financial situation. Applicants are asked to state how much funding they have received through student assistance, debt-related resources, and personal contributions, as a way to estimate the student's eligibility for the bursary.

### **Nova Scotia**

**Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC)** in Halifax provides a list of [student supports](#) available during the pandemic. Types of supports listed include [student services](#), which has moved online. New online supports have been added, such as the [monthly workshop calendar](#) including dedicated days of self-care, learning strategies, financial supports, writing centre supports and more. The college also offers e-counselling services for enrolled students, as well as [learning and wellness support](#). This includes wellness support resources, such as the [COVID-19 Student Support Network](#) where post-secondary students can discuss anxieties and

academic concerns brought upon by the pandemic. The learning support section provides information on key supports including the NSCC library laptop loan program, online writing centre and tutoring.

# Learning Technologies

The pandemic has put accessible learning technology in the spotlight, as current technologies used for educational purposes can pose accessibility challenges for students with disabilities. Remote learning technologies existed and were in use before the pandemic. However, the call to address existing accessibility issues has grown stronger given the almost total shift to online learning at most colleges and universities across Canada. This section examines various accessible learning technologies being used during the pandemic by post-secondary institutions.

[Otter.ai](#) was created by AISense – a start-up company dedicated in making voice conversations valuable for all. Otter is notetaking software designed for universities and other higher level education institutions. It turns vocal conversations into smart notes that can be saved and shared. The software also allows users to take snap shots of whiteboards, speakers, or presentation slides during a recording, which will be inserted into academic transcripts. Currently, [Otter for Education](#) is free providing affordable accessibility.

[Live Transcribe & Sound Notifications](#) is a Google Play app “that makes everyday conversations and surrounding sounds more accessible among people who are deaf and hard of hearing, using just your Android phone” (Google Play, 2020). The app uses speech recognition and sound detection technology, provides real-time transcriptions of conversations and sends notifications based on your surrounding sounds at home – such as the fire alarm and doorbell ringing.

On most phones, you can directly access Live Transcribe & Sound Notifications by:

1. Opening your device's Settings app.
2. Tapping Accessibility, then tapping Live Transcribe or Sound Notifications, depending on which app you'd like to start.
3. Tapping Use service, then accepting the permissions.
4. Using the [Accessibility button or gesture](#) to start Live Transcribe or Sound Notifications.

The app is free in the Google Play Store and is available for Android phones only.

[TextHear](#) is speech-to-text software for those with hearing loss. The software has a complete set of in-house capabilities in both hardware and software products. With the [Geemarc V2T-10 Voice to Text Converter device](#), the TextHear app is able to connect with landline phones using existing cables to allow TextHear's transcription services. TextHear offers:

## Smart Speech to Text

- Continuous and non-stop. Click the mic once. Speak as much as you like. Enhanced with smart automatic spacing and capitalization, such that manual editing is reduced to minimum.

## Automatic Punctuation

- Our goal is to help you understand natural-speech in real-time. That's why we insert punctuation automatically. The result is that speech is transcribed in an easy-to read and comprehensible manner.

#### **Privacy**

- No Interpreter in the conversation. No one listens to your most private conversations.

#### **Mobile & Advanced**

- Take it anywhere. Save the text for later use and archiving. Clear display, adjustable fonts and look.

#### **Low Cost, High Quality**

- Automated conversion – faster and more accurate than most existing relay services.

#### **Multilingual**

- Supports more than a 100 languages & accents. Supports real-time translation for advanced applications.

The TextHear app is free for [Android](#) on the Play Store. The [iOS](#) app costs \$0.03 per minute of usage, but is free to download in the App store.

[Ava](#) is dedicated in eliminating communication barriers by empowering deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and inclusive organizations with Ava's captioning software. Ava can help display instant captions for online classes or video lectures, regardless of platform used. Ava works with both Windows and Mac, and will display captions at the top of the video or presentation so the user can follow comfortably. Ava also provides live professional captioners who correct captions in real-time. Ava was awarded \$4.2 million by the [Khosla and Initialized Means for The Future of Accessibility](#), which allowed improvements in Ava's closed captioning, enabled Ava to include unlimited captions in its free package, and facilitated the launch of Ava Scribe, which uses a mix of AI and transcription professionals to aid in captioning accuracy. Ava is available for both Android and iOS.

[Desire2Learn \(D2L\)](#) is interactive software, designed for accessible learning. Users can personalize their learning experience to go through content at their own pace as well as accessing learning from any device. Accessibility is embedded into the programming of the D2L software and design features, which support Universal Design for Learning to ensure those with disabilities are not faced with obstacles when using the software. D2L also automatically autogenerates closed captioning videos in different languages for free. D2L is free to use if your post-secondary institution or workplace offers it as fundamental software in learning and planning.

[ReadSpeaker](#) is text to speech software which creates audio versions of courses, textbooks, assessments, research, training materials, personal documents and more, allowing listeners to follow along highlighted text. ReadSpeaker's "audio-enhanced reading, writing, and learning tools improves learning outcomes for all students, while meeting accessibility requirements and the needs of a larger percentage of learners, such as those with visual impairments, reading difficulties, dyslexia, and foreign students" (ReadSpeaker, 2020).

[Read&Write for Education](#) “is a software toolbar that helps students create and access content with the literacy support features needed to engage with a personalized learning experience - helping every member of the class meet their full potential” (Read&Write, 2020). The software supports students in everyday tasks such as reading text out loud, understanding unfamiliar words, researching assignments and proofing written work. It benefits students with learning disabilities by aiding students to express themselves with increased fluency and confidence in their academics. Athabasca University also has Read & Write available for students and staff to activate as a trial with an Athabasca University email. For more information about Athabasca University assistive technology, click [here](#).

[Kurzweil 3000](#) is a platform that supports students in reading, note-taking, studying, writing, and test taking. It is currently available for download for students and staff.

## **International Students**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, international students have been among the least protected in terms of financial resources. Many international students cannot apply for the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) or the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) because they do not have Canadian citizenship. Even bursaries and awards provided by post-secondary institutions are limited, as most require Canadian citizenship to apply. In an article by Wesam Abdelhamid Mohamed, an international master’s student and former Vice-President of Advocacy for the Society of Graduate Students at Western University (current Chair of the Canadian Federation of Students’ Graduate Students’ Caucus), he talks of international students’ financial struggles in Canada despite contributing a significant amount of money into the Canadian economy (Mohamed, 2020).

Since March 2020, many travel restrictions have been in place to help slow the spread of COVID-19. This left many International students to figure out how to continue with their studies in their home countries during the pandemic. On July 14, 2020, the Government of Canada released [Measures to support international students during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), which provided a list of “temporary policy changes intended to support international students, learning institutions and other stakeholders in Canada’s education sector” (Government of Canada, 2020).

The list states:

- International students who had a valid study permit, or who were approved for a study permit on or before March 18, 2020, are exempt from travel restrictions that prevented most foreign nationals from countries other than the United States from entering Canada. All students, including those entering Canada from the United States, are only admitted to Canada if their travel is essential and they have a credible plan to quarantine for 14 days.

- Students in Canada who were forced to study online, reduce their studies to part-time, or take a break from their studies completely, as a result of restrictions on classroom learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are allowed to continue working on- or off-campus if their study permit allows it.
- Students already in Canada were assured that they wouldn't lose their eligibility for a post-graduation work permit if they were forced to complete more than 50% of their program online, reduce their studies to part-time or take a break from their studies completely as a result of restrictions on classroom learning due to the pandemic.
- Until August 31, 2020, international students were permitted to work more than 20 hours per week off-campus during their academic session if they are employed in an essential service or function.
- Students beginning a new study program in the 2020 spring, summer or fall semesters could begin their classes online from abroad without affecting their eligibility for a post-graduation work permit, provided they are able to complete at least 50% of their program in Canada.
- Students starting a program in the spring, summer or fall semester would not have time deducted from the length of their post-graduation work permit for studies completed from outside Canada until the end of 2020.

The issue of inadequate tuition support for international students existed before the pandemic, and has been in the spotlight during the pandemic given these students' lack of access to CESB and CERB, and many bursaries. In addition, tuition fees have increased by 7.6% (upwards to \$38,019 a year depending on program) since the 2019/2020 semester (Statistics Canada, 2020).

The article [CESB Exclusions Leave International Students with Uncertainty](#), by Wesam Abdelhamid Mohamed explains that tuition fees are an urgent concern for international students. Many students believe that they shouldn't pay full price for tuition – and definitely not face an increase in fees – as the pandemic has caused many to lose their jobs and the closing of campus facilities renders many resources unavailable. The article states:

“We are expected to maintain progress in our programs, yet we are given very little in the way of tools to do so,” argued Heather Stewart. Stewart is an international student from the United States completing her Ph.D. in Philosophy at Western University.

“It is baffling – if Canada and the university value our contribution as much as they claim, why we are excluded from this benefit? Or why, in light of this exclusion, has the university not committed to achieving parity with regard to the disparity between domestic and international students' financial support,” said Stewart (Mohamed, 2020).

Mohamed's article states that international students contribute billions to the Canadian economy, and also account for roughly [50% of the tuition revenue](#), according to Paul Davidson, President and CEO of Universities Canada (Keung & Teotonio, 2020). Canada's decision to exclude International students from funding such as CERB and CESB leaves some students very uncertain about their ability to continue their studies. One student interviewed in Mohamed's

article stated, “The only realistic outcome I see is one in which I withdraw from the program completely and move back home.”

Mohamed’s first article in the New Canadian Media, [‘I’ve Seen the Good, the Bad and the Ugly as an International Student’](#), published at the beginning of COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020, talks of the financial disparities between international students and the funding and support allocated to help them. Mohamed is an International student himself. He is a Master’s graduate in Engineering Science from the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Western University.

In the article, Mohamed shares the differences between how he imagined his experience as an International student would be, and the reality. He states:

“Why do Canadians need to care about international students?” is a question I’m frequently asked when I’m advocating for the rights of international students.

In addition to being an international student at Western University, I’m also the International Students Representative of the Canadian Federation of Students. Before I arrived in Canada, I pictured having the perfect student-life experience, but it didn’t take long before I started struggling because of a lack of support and infrastructure. Through my unique perspective I’ve seen the good, the bad and the ugly when it comes to life as an international student” (Mohamed, ‘I’ve Seen the Good, the Bad and the Ugly as an International Student’, 2020).

Throughout the article, he argues that there is a lack of attention for international students and supports need to help them throughout their studies. International students are expected to pay taxes, like all Canadian citizens. However, only five out of 10 provinces extend public healthcare to international students. If these students are not covered by public health care plans, they must have privatized health insurance, which can be extremely expensive for international students who also pay three times more than domestic students for tuition. According to [Statistics Canada](#), “the average cost of an undergraduate degree for an international student is \$17,744, three times the amount for Canadians. At the University of Waterloo, international students in the computer science program faced a whopping [62% tuition increase](#), when fees skyrocketed from \$15,823 to \$25,653 in one year” (Mohamed, ‘I’ve Seen the Good, the Bad and the Ugly as an International Student’, 2020).

Mohamed served as an elected representative of the [Canadian Federation of Students \(CFS\)](#) National Executive as the International Students' Commissioner and the Deputy-Chairperson for the CFS-National Graduate Caucus. He is currently the chairperson of the CFS-National Graduate Caucus. CFS is the largest student organization in Canada, representing over 60 student unions across Canada and more than 550,000 students in post-secondary education. During the Canadian Federation of Students Lobby Week in February 2019, Mohamed and his team spoke to Members of Provincial Parliament, advocating for the CFS initiative [Fairness for International Students](#), which “recommended a cap on tuition fees, health coverage for

students with valid study permits, and allowing students to use the time they spent pursuing their post-secondary degrees towards their applications for Canadian citizenship” (Mohamed, ‘I’ve Seen the Good, the Bad and the Ugly as an International Student’, 2020).

Unfortunately, the Members of Provincial Parliament did not agree with these recommendations, leaving many international students without aid. Mohamed’s final statement in his article reads:

“Until there’s [public awareness of the issues international students face](#), Canadians and elected representatives will not feel the urgency to act. Without the proper controls and supports in place, I’m concerned that the number of international students will continue to rise like water pouring into an unmonitored glass, throwing us to the floor” (Mohamed, ‘I’ve Seen the Good, the Bad and the Ugly as an International Student’, 2020).

On February 19, 2021, The Government of Canada has released the publication, [COVID-19: A Guide for International Students in Canada Arriving from Abroad](#), to “put in place a consolidated set of guidelines to support the return of international students and outline the roles and responsibilities of Designated Learning Institutions, Provinces and Territories, and the Government of Canada” (Government of Canada, 2021). It outlines what International students need to know before leaving their home countries, including the need for international students and accompanying family members to have a negative COVID-19 test before entering Canada. Designated learning institutions are to host international students under the authority of the province or territory (PT) in which they operate. “As long as the institution is published on IRCC’s list of PT approved DLIs re-opening to students arriving from abroad, the institution is providing the student with assurance that it can welcome them into their program of study or primary or secondary school curriculum because they have the appropriate measures in place to ensure students can meet obligations under the Quarantine Act” (Government of Canada, 2021).

Student unions and student organizations have attempted to fill the gap left by inadequate support at the federal and provincial government levels.

At Northwest Community College in Terrace, BC, the students' union is providing emergency funds for international students. A newsletter released by the Coast Mountain Students' Union explains:

“Coast Mountain College International students can now apply for a \$100 grocery store gift card thanks to a \$10,000 donation from the Coast Mountain Students’ Union.

International students have been particularly impacted by COVID-19 because they do not currently qualify for the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit. In response, the Canadian Government recently removed a 20-hour work week restriction to help International students improve their financial security.

“This relief fund is for international students as there are very little relief benefits for them,” says Christopher Blois, Chair, Coast Mountain Students’ Union. Last month the CMTN Foundation made available \$40,000 in grocery store gift cards to help students. This additional funding from the Coast Mountain Students’ Union is intended to help students who have not yet received this or other kinds of emergency relief from Coast Mountain College.

“On behalf of the college and CMTN Foundation we truly appreciate this generous donation to help Coast Mountain College students get through this trying and uncertain time. This will help international students bridge the gap for their day to day living needs,” says Brian Badge, Executive Director, Advancement and Foundation CAO.

For more information on this relief fund and to apply, contact Allison Conway, Financial Aid Officer, at [aconway@coastmountaincollege.ca](mailto:aconway@coastmountaincollege.ca) (Coast Mountain College News, 2020).

## Additional Resources for International Students

- [International Students and International Education](#) (PDF)
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information for international students](#)
- [What kind of health insurance do international students get? - Ontario](#)
- [International Students: Medical Care Plan – Newfoundland and Labrador](#)
- [Health Care - Alberta](#)
- [International students in Canada: who to contact if you need help](#)
- [International scholarships](#)
- [International scholarship opportunities for non-Canadians](#)
- [International Council for Canadian Studies](#)
- [Information for international students: General Information About Living and Studying in Canada](#)
- [Studying In Canada As A Student with Disabilities](#)
- [Scholarships in Canada for International Students](#)

## Student Unions

During the move from on-campus services to online, new barriers have emerged around accessible learning for students with disabilities. A number of student unions have acknowledged these barriers and have created resources for students who find themselves in difficult situations.

## Current Initiatives Supported by Student Unions

### Pacific & Yukon Region

Simon Fraser University (SFU) Disability and Neurodiversity Alliance in Victoria, British Columbia has called for the university to further implement a learning style called asynchronous learning. The SFU Disability and Neurodiversity Alliance says asynchronous learning “allows for self-paced learning within a flexible time frame. It often includes self-guided lesson modules, recorded lectures, and multiple options for student participation and classroom engagement, while requiring time-constrained student attendance only at a minimum such as for exams. Asynchronous learning is a student-centred approach that supports diverse student needs, one that is imperative during this time of crisis” (NEADS, 2021). The Alliance also shares some of the complex barriers students may face during completely virtual (synchronous) post-secondary operations:

- Inconsistent Wi-Fi access and computer access (For example, low-income students sharing a single computer with the rest of their household).
- Students who had to travel back to their home countries during the pandemic or have traveled abroad and cannot safely return to Canada, whose lectures are now less accessible due to time zone differences.
- Students doing on-the-ground volunteer and employed work to help vulnerable populations survive the pandemic, often at extreme hours.
- Students who are essential workers, who may be now working more irregular shifts given layoffs and employee turnover rates.
- Students who are parents or caregivers, who now must conduct childcare on less predictable schedules.
  - Students with disabilities receiving home care to support their activities of daily living, who may have their home care schedules impacted due to COVID-19.

Asynchronous learning would provide students accessible ways of learning as synchronous learning is a direct and less accommodating form of learning which can hinder a student’s education.

### Society for Students with Disabilities (SSD) - University of Victoria

“The Society for Students with a Disability (SSD) is a post-secondary student advocacy group under the University of Victoria Students’ Union which promotes the full participation and inclusion of students who self-identify as having one or more disabilities at the University of Victoria. The SSD aims to support students who self-identify as having one or more disabilities; in particular, we support students to reduce barriers in the social and emotional domains of student life.

As of COVID-19, we provide online and distanced support for our members, such as online Crafternoon Workshops and Open Studio via Zoom, Workshops, Games Night, Food Security Distancing Support Program (with the choice of ONE of the following programs funded through SSD: The Good Food Box, Red Cedar Cafe or \$100 monetary reimbursement), and a social platform to engage with other members. If you're interested in joining our community or finding out more about our social programs, check out our programs page" (The Society for Students with a Disability (SSD) , 2020)

## **Prairie and Northern Region**

### **Students with Disabilities Hardship Grant through Canadian Federation of Students – Manitoba**

The Canadian Federation of Students – Manitoba represents over 45 000 post-secondary students from the University of Brandon, University of Winnipeg, Université de Saint-Boniface and University of Manitoba.

During the 2020 Annual General Meeting, the membership passed a motion to support students with disabilities in the form of upfront grants to cover the costs associated with remote learning. This could include, but isn't limited to: devices, cables, adaptive software, internet bills, or any other costs related to accessing education online as a result of COVID-19. While some steps have been taken to support students with disabilities by provincial and federal leadership, there are many barriers still in place. While these grants cannot fully address all financial obstacles for students with disabilities, they do help to provide some funding to support studies during this period of self-isolation.

The Students with Disabilities Hardship Grants are open to domestic AND international students with disabilities who study at one of the Canadian Federation of Students - Manitoba member locals. That includes:

- The University of Winnipeg
- Brandon University
- Université de Saint-Boniface
- The University of Manitoba

The online application form can be accessed at <http://tiny.cc/2nbypz>

For a hard copy form (available in large print), you can coordinate contactless delivery by emailing [chair@cfsmb.ca](mailto:chair@cfsmb.ca) or calling (204) 783-0787. All information provided through the application will remain confidential and be reviewed anonymously by a committee comprised solely of students with disabilities.

<http://www.cfsmb.ca>

[NEADS - Media](#)

## **Access Lounge - University of Winnipeg**

“The Access Lounge is a space on campus dedicated to students who are disabled by barriers. This space is for those students to study, hang out or complete course work.

The Access Lounge was initiated by the 2016/17 UWSA Accessibility Director, who worked with the board of directors, executive team and UWSA, along with U of W staff, to develop a consultation process for students to give their input. Today, the Access Lounge reflects the needs and wants from students who gave their input during our consultation sessions or through our online survey.

This project was completed with the support of the Disability Justice Collective (formerly UWSAccess), a student group working to bring together, advocate for and support students with disabilities/disabled students/mad students/students who are mentally ill/ neurodivergent students. Students who experience any form of disability are welcome to join” (Access Lounge, 2020).

For more information, contact Access Lounge Coordinator Steve Henderson at [accesslounge@theuwsa.ca](mailto:accesslounge@theuwsa.ca).

## **Ontario**

**Students for Barrier-Free Access**, a student union support service centre based at the University of Toronto, has created a survey based on COVID-19 specific changes in accommodations for students with disabilities. The organization also advocates for students regarding financial aid, stressing the need for students to feel financially secure and emphasizing the need for the University of Toronto to extend its [emergency bursary](#).

[MSU Maccess](#), a service centre of the McMaster University Students' Union, is a community, peer support, and advocacy outlet for students with disabilities. Maccess services are available for any McMaster student who experiences (or identifies as) any of the following

- disability/disabled
- chronic illness or health conditions
- madness, mental health concerns, or mental illness
- neurodivergence/neurodiversity
- learning disability
- d/Deaf or hard of hearing
- sensory impairment
- navigating inaccessibility or accessing accommodations
- other experiences/identities that are part of the larger Disability Justice movement.

Maccess aims to build and maintain a campus that celebrates, advocates, and ensures inclusiveness in the area of disability. It provides programming and events in an effort to establish a sense of community for those that self-identify as having disabilities or as disabled. In addition, Maccess strives to advocate on the behalf of students in a proactive and affirmative fashion and provide educational programming on and opportunities to learn about critical disability studies (Maccess, 2020).

During the pandemic, Maccess has held a wide range of virtual events to continue the bonding of a community. They have held events on a variety of subjects: such as community groups for disabled queer & trans students, coping with isolation, disability discussions for students with disabilities to discuss their accessibility experiences in online learning during COVID-19 – and more. The Maccess [Facebook Page](#), also shares job opportunities and regular updates on campus life relevant to disabled students.

### **RyeACCESS - Ryerson University**

“RyeACCESS recognizes that students with disabilities have a diverse range of experiences both on and off campus. However, one experience that is consistent is that of disempowerment. As students with disabilities, it is our time to reclaim our bodies and minds, take control of the services we use, and work with our allies to achieve the freedom and autonomy we deserve. This freedom comes in multiple forms including: professors and staff working with us to find creative solutions; the ability to physically access every building, classroom and office on campus; knowing that when you are experiencing a crisis that people will be there to support you in the ways you need – rather than forcing treatment; full choice and self-direction of support services such as attendants, interpreters, and interveners; and much more.

RyeACCESS works to reclaim our bodies and minds through advocacy, campaigns, outreach, education, and events. We focus on both systemic and individual issues in an effort to create an equitable environment and promote the empowerment, autonomy and freedom of students with disabilities” (RyeAccess, 2020).

### **Carleton Disability Awareness Centre (CDAC)**

“The Carleton Disability Awareness Centre (CDAC) provides the Carleton community with social supports regarding disability and accessibility. CDAC is designed to act as a forum for disability issues and to provide advocacy and events. The CDAC staff aims to foster social opportunities and to involve the CUSA membership in disability education and inclusion. They endeavour to challenge the stereotypes about disability and assist in the removal of barriers to every aspect of university life. CDAC achieves this through a wide range of programming for students that are both fun and informative.

Since its founding in 1988, CDAC has become one of the leading disability awareness centers in the country and has been at the forefront of advocacy at the student level. Whether it be in policy through the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), or our Disability

Awareness Weeks, we have always been proud of our ability to promote effective change within the Carleton community.

CDAC's programs include speaker events and workshops regarding issues surrounding visible and non-visible disabilities, including mental health, sexuality, accessibility, and more. The centre also runs programs to support disabled students on campus, such as wheelchair rentals and campaigns to improve accessibility and disability awareness on campus" (Carleton Disability Awareness Centre, 2020).

### **York Federation of Students Access Centre (YFS Access Centre)**

"Inclusive Community Engagement and Experience (I.C.E.E.) is for the community by the community and strives for awareness, allyship, and autonomy to further empower folks with disabilities. We aim to further minimize social, emotional, and environmental barriers and challenges. Our hope is for inclusivity to no longer be a buzzword, but an action that honours access needs for all persons.

I.C.E.E. is also affiliated with the York Federation of Students (YFS) Access Centre, which is a grassroots community service group for York University students with disabilities.

We hope to educate folks about disability services by providing resources, experiences and support through our training and modules" (York Federation of Students, 2020).

Stay up to date on YFS Access Centre events by following their [Facebook page](#).

## **Quebec**

### **The Quebec Association of Post-secondary Students with Disabilities (AQEIPS)**

"For the past 20 years, the AQEIPS has been advocating for equal opportunities in education for postsecondary students with disabilities. Our association is made up of persons with disabilities who were able to attend regular classes in elementary and secondary school and who, as a result, had the option to pursue post-secondary education. The promotion of the Social Model of Disability and of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guides our efforts towards building a truly inclusive society, one in which the cycle of poverty and isolation can be broken by ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the same level of education as students without disabilities do" (AQEIPS, 2020).

AQEIPS has partnered with other organizations on a project presenting webinars, short videos and educational materials "on inclusive pedagogy and universal learning for design (UDL) in the context of distance learning during a pandemic (AQEIPS, 2020). The project is called *Teaching inclusively in 2020: COVID-19, remote learning and universal design for learning*. Keep up to date with AQEIPS and their work on advocating for UDL [here](#).

## **Atlantic Region**

### **Dalhousie Student Union**

“Bursaries of up to \$1,000 are available each year, which are open to all Dalhousie students with disabilities. We recognize that there are additional financial burdens associated with having a disability, and these bursaries are provided to help defray these costs.

Due to COVID-19, we've updated our criteria to better accommodate the diverse needs of students and provide support to as wide a range of access needs and disabilities as possible.

The main purpose of the Student Accessibility Fund Committee (SAFC) is to create an open and accessible DSU (Dalhousie Student Union) for all members by supporting those who face institutional access barriers. We strive to represent the interests of all DSU members who experience access needs, both internally on the DSU Council and in the greater University community, by promoting an accessible campus here at Dalhousie University” (Dalhousie Student Union, 2020).

# Events During COVID-19

Throughout the pandemic, non-governmental organizations for disabled persons, student unions and post-secondary service centres have held virtual events focused on topics including accessibility. This section provides examples of these events held across Canada.

## Federal

### **NEADS Conversation About Remote Classes: Zoom consultation with students with disabilities about their accessibility needs in remote classes with AQEIPS and NEADS, May 14, 2020**

Inspired by a similar event held by the Quebec Association for Equity and Inclusion in Post-Secondary Education (AQEIPS) that was quite successful (see summary report in French here: <https://aqeips.qc.ca/publications/rapports/consultation-avec-etudiants-en-situation-de-handicap-sur-les-cours-a-distance-2/>), NEADS partnered with AQEIPS to offer a Canada-wide English version of this conversation about remote classes. This Zoom conference aimed to help participants better understand the challenges caused by this situation and hopefully find solutions.

**NEADS Virtual Coffee Chats** occur every other Friday via Zoom. Check the [NEADS event page](#) or follow the [NEADS Facebook Page](#), for updates on Virtual Coffee Chats and its speakers.

**The Canadian Journal of Disability Studies** held a Twitter chat titled Disability in Post-Secondary Classrooms Public in January 2020, with faculty members, instructors, and teaching assistants to understand the education these individuals have received around accommodations for disabled students and understanding the barriers disabled undergraduate and graduate students encounter in their programs. Similarly, graduate students, instructors and faculty members with disabilities were asked about their experiences with accommodations. The guided discussion used the hashtag #CJDSChat, and was moderated by Danielle Lorenz, the Knowledge Mobilization Editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, and PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1196180254104761/>

## Provincial

### Pacific & Yukon Region

**The SFU Disability and Neurodiversity Alliance** held a webinar, Voices of Access and Disability in Higher Education: Part 1, on July 17, 2020. The event focused on how society “defines access and identifies barriers rooted in ableism that impede access to education spaces.”

**UBC Department of Geography's Equity and Diversity Committee** hosted [Voices of Access and Disability in Higher Education: Part 2 - Opportunities for Change](#) on July 24, 2020. With closed captioning and ASL interpretation, this event highlighted the "lived experiences of disability in education and academia and encouraged dialogue within our universities and other learning spaces around the importance of broadening our understanding of access and disability as a justice-centred issue. For education to be truly inclusive, we need to care for students, staff and faculty with disabilities beyond means of accommodation and challenge ableist practices."

An event called **Kick Start – Q & A Info Session for Students Preparing for the Upcoming School Year – Accessibility in Online Learning** was held via Zoom, to help prepare students for the fall 2020 term's online and blended learning environments. Between August and October 2020, students were invited to participate in a series of drop-in Q & A sessions with coordinators and staff from Accessibility Services across British Columbia. Sessions were co-hosted by representatives from three provincial accessibility support organizations: Post-Secondary Communication Access Services (PCAS), Assistive Technology BC (AT-BC) and The Centre for Accessible Post-secondary Education Resources (CAPER-BC).

**SFU Disability and Neurodiversity Alliance** held an event on September 22, 2020 called Self-Advocacy as a Disabled Student During COVID-19. The Google Meet event explored how students with disabilities can advocate for themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Topics included:

- Accessing academic accommodations through the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL)
- The impact of COVID on accommodations
- How to communicate with professors & TAs
- Tips and strategies to self-advocate when facing urgent barriers

Notes taken during the discussion were [turned into a public resource](#). Facebook

event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/314533186538910>

Registration form: <https://forms.gle/QRewEzLNpJAB6aLp9>

**SFU Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue** held a special webinar entitled **Upholding Rights of People with Disabilities during COVID-19**. The June 2020 panel discussion and Q&A explored how the rights of people with disabilities can be upheld to foster equity in COVID-19 policy responses. Panellists included

- Jewelles Smith (Chairperson of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and PhD Candidate)
- Miles Stratholt (Senior Policy Analyst, Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training)
- Heather Walkus (Human Rights Advocate and co-founder of The Coalition of People Who Use Guide and Service Dogs in Canada)
- Eileen Davidson (patient advocate and Ambassador for the Arthritis Society).

## Prairies & Northern Region

### Manitoba

Winnipeg MP Leah Gazan hosted a [webinar](#) entitled **Discussion on Disability Policy, Activism, and Justice** in August 2020. The discussion covered issues of disability policy, activism, and justice. Panellists included:

- Karina Cardona, a community activist, educator, mobility researcher and artist. She arrived in Canada as a child refugee and acquired a spinal cord injury in her teens. Having lived with disability for 25 years, Karina shares her life experiences to help build understanding towards an inclusive society. Karina and her partner relocated from Winkler to Winnipeg during the COVID-19 response;
- Michael Prince, who teaches social policy and public health at the University of Victoria in BC. Active in the disability movement for over 25 years, he is currently on the social policy committee of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) and a member of the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group created in April, by Minister Qualtrough. He is also the board chair of Community Living BC, a provincial crown corporation that funds supports and services to adults with developmental disabilities as well as individuals who have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder;
- Allen Mankewich, who has a wide range of experience working on disability policy in the public and non-profit sectors and has served on several community advisory committees and boards of directors. Allen is a resident of Winnipeg Centre.

### Ontario

**MSU Maccess and the AccessMac Program, Equity & Inclusion Office** organized an event called Disability DIScussions - Remote Access/ibility for McMaster University disabled students on July 27, 2020. It was a closed off event for students with disabilities attending McMaster, to provide a safe(r) space “for peers to discuss their accessibility/inclusion experiences in moving to remote/virtual/online spaces resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.”

- **MSU Maccess also organized Mad Pride Tea Party by on July 18, 2020. Participants were invited to** grab their wackiest hat, brew a fresh pot of tea, and join an afternoon of casual conversation about madness, mental health, neurodiversity, accessibility, Mad Pride, the Mad Movement, and more! Discussion and perspectives explored the ideas of madness and Mad pride, finding pride in your experiences, and more.

Mad Pride is an arts, culture, and heritage festival created by psychiatric survivors, consumers, mad people, and folks the world has labelled “mentally ill.” Mad Pride is about:

- remembering and participating in mad history
- challenging discrimination
- advocating for rights
- affirming mad identities
- developing and empowering mad communities
- having fun!

**The Canadian Federation of Students - Ontario and the Ontario Federation of Labour** held a Zoom conference event called [Campuses that Care](#) on June 25, 2020, focused on how post-secondary campuses can be safe for both students and campus workers. This conference considered issues of poor funding for post-secondary institutions and cutbacks by colleges and universities, and how this may impact the health and safety for those who work and study on campuses.

**Organizer Sowmya Rajasekaran** held the webinar entitled [Buildupwomen Series: Accessibility during Covid-19](#) on August 13, 2020. The event explored how communities, the government and organizations can make COVID-19 response and support inclusive for people with disabilities. Speakers included:

- Karine-Myrgianie Jean-François - Director of Operations and Projects at the Dis/Abled Women's Network (DAWN) of Canada;
- Wanda K. Deschamps - Principal at Liberty Co;
- Jeannette Campbell - Chief Executive Officer at Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN);
- Christine Malone - Diversity and Inclusion Specialist at City of Ottawa;
- Christina Ranieri - President and Executive Director at Ability First Ottawa.

**Centre for Independent Living Toronto** held a webinar on June 25, 2020, to share information on Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and COVID-19. Participants heard from John Mossa, CILT Independent Living Skills Coordinator, Catherine Manson, Don Valley Community Legal Services, and Andrea Hatala, ODSP Action Coalition and were invited to build up their knowledge of:

- ODSP and Emergency Benefits
- ODSP and Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)
- ODSP and Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB)
- What to do if you qualify for and are not receiving these benefits
- Community Advocacy Campaigns and ODSP Resources

**MSU Maccess** held a series of Coping in Isolation & General Peer Support Groups virtually during summer 2020.

- Participants were welcome to join with or without their webcam, by speaking or typing in the chat box, or participating by phone.

**MSU Maccess** also hosted a 2STLGBQIA+ History Week Disabled and Queer Community Art Circle with the MSU Pride Community Centre. The event was held on November 16, 2020 and

facilitated by Kate Welsh (she/they) and Mari Ramsawakh (they/them). The event was open to to disabled 2STLGBQIA+ folks, and involved an art session and community and discussion related to disability, accessibility and queer identity. The event took place via Zoom with live captioning offered via Otter.ai.

## Quebec

**AQEIPS and RIQEDI presented a series of online workshops** on Teaching inclusively in 2020: COVID-19, focused on remote learning and universal design for learning. The first workshop in October 2020 was an Introduction to inclusive teaching and to universal design for learning (UDL) in remote classes, with Paul Turcotte, Professor at Vieux-Montréal CEGEP and researcher at CRISPESH. It focused on the foundations of UDL, inclusive education and on their application in remote classes during COVID-19. Online resources [are](https://aqeips.qc.ca/en/udl) available at [aqeips.qc.ca/en/udl](https://aqeips.qc.ca/en/udl).

### **AQEIPS Annual General Meeting was held on June 22, 2020 via Zoom.**

The event shared info on activities and projects worked on during the year, as well as an interactive workshop by AQEIPS President Shamron Spence, on what students need to know to get the most out of their income tax return as a student with a disability.

# Mental Health

The pandemic has had considerable impact on the mental health of many people, particularly with students and people with disabilities. Unknowns and changing developments during the pandemic have led to feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear - all of which are normal emotions during a crisis. As noted in the [Taking care of your mental and physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), during these unusual times, people may react in different ways, including:

- a sense of being socially excluded or judged;
- concern about your education and wellbeing;
- fear of getting sick with COVID-19, or of making others sick;
- worry about losing your job, not being able to work or finances;
- fear of being apart from loved ones due to isolation or physical distancing;
- helplessness, boredom, loneliness and depression due to isolation or physical distancing.

Quarantine, self-isolation, and the pandemic itself has cause deterioration of mental health status in those with existing challenges. It has also brought mental wellness concerns to light in many people who may have been previously unaware of them.

During the AQEIPS [virtual meeting](#), mental health and a structure known as the mental health continuum model were discussed. The mental health continuum operates in four modes characterized by notable signs and indicators (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020).

- Healthy (optimal mental wellbeing)
  - Normal mood fluctuations
  - Physically and socially active
  - No impact and trouble due to substance abuse
  - Normal sleep patterns
  - Limited/no addictive behaviours
- Reacting (minimum wellbeing)
  - Nervousness/irritability
  - Trouble sleeping/low energy
  - Decreased social activity
  - Regular to frequent alcohol consumption, limited binge drinking
  - Limited to some trouble/impact due to substance abuse
- Injured (minimum mental illness)
  - Anxiety, anger, pervasive sadness, hopelessness
  - Restless, disturbed sleep
  - Frequent alcohol consumption, binge drinking
  - Struggle to control addictive behaviours
  - Avoidance, tardiness, decreased performance
- Ill (maximum mental illness)
  - Excessive anxiety, panic attacks, easily enraged, aggressive
  - Cannot concentrate, loss of cognitive ability

- Withdrawal, absenteeism
- Significant trouble/impact due to substance use
- Constant fatigue, illness.

The AQEIPS discussion included more than 80 participants, who were encouraged to respond to questions surrounding their experiences during COVID-19. One respondent said they were missing interacting with colleagues and students. Another shared feelings of overwhelm with taking care of students' mental health and their own, and another individual expressed their worries that the anxiety of others might influence their own.

A [national online survey](#) conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) sought to understand mental health and substance use impacts of COVID-19. Over the course of three weeks, 3,000 Canadian's age 18 and older responded to the survey. The results indicate that 19.5% of people have experienced moderate to severe anxiety, 26.6% engaged in binge drinking, 21% felt lonely, and 18.4% felt depressed.

Mental health amongst post-secondary students has been an especially acute concern. Many students normally struggle with the stresses of grades, course work, graduating etc. With the pandemic resulting in post-secondary school shut-downs, many students are now dealing with feelings of uncertainty around the future of their education.

The **Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA)** has developed a series of tips to help students cope during these uncertain times. These tips include going outside and taking a walk to clear their minds, being mindful about checking the news as it may further induce anxiety, not putting too much stress on oneself during the pandemic (Tishcoff, 2020). Educators may also feel a substantial amount of stress around moving to a new method of teaching, which they might not be familiar with. The CAMH also provides strategies for educators on how to cope with the stress and anxiety brought upon by the pandemic, how to challenge worries and anxious thoughts, and how to deal with problems in structured ways (CAMH, 2020).

The **National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students** was created by the Mental Health Commission of Canada to promote positive mental health strategies for post-secondary students during the pandemic. Below is the statement released by the Mental Health Commission:

A new national standard championed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) to guide policies, procedures, and practices that promote positive student mental health and well-being has been developed for use by post-secondary institutions, starting today.

The National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students is the first framework of its kind in the world. It is designed to enhance and expand strategies already put in place by Canada's universities, colleges, institutes, CEGEPs, and polytechnics as they work to foster positive mental health for students.

“We recognize that the majority of mental illnesses are first diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 24, when many are in or just out of post-secondary education,” said Louise Bradley, president and CEO of the MHCC. “Students may be experiencing even higher levels of stress and anxiety as the pandemic unfolds. There is a clear and pressing need. This new national Standard will help post-secondary institutions address this critical societal issue for our young people.”

The Standard, which is being released during Mental Illness Awareness Week, is a voluntary set of guidelines created and published by CSA Group, a global leader in standards development, with the support of the MHCC and its funding partners — Bell Let’s Talk, The Rossy Foundation, RBC Foundation, and Health Canada.

The evidence-based framework was developed over two years by CSA’s expert technical committee and was informed by extensive dialogues from across the country with students, administrators, service providers, health agencies, governments, and individuals with lived experience of mental illness.

The voluntary Standard supports five key outcomes:

- greater awareness and reduced stigma around mental health;
- increased access to student supports, on and off campus;
- better life and resiliency skills that students can use at school, at work, and in their daily lives;
- healthier and safer institutional environments;
- improved opportunities for student success.

“Supporting the mental health of Canada’s young people is a priority for Bell Let’s Talk,” said Mary Deacon, chair of Bell Let’s Talk. “We’re confident the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students will advance the great work already under way by universities and colleges to provide healthy and safe environments that support student success.”

“It’s the first national set of guidelines to support good mental health practices on college and university campuses across Canada,” added Stephanie Rossy, vice-chair of The Rossy Foundation. “The Standard breaks new ground as institutions work toward the shared goal of better mental health and well-being for all of our students.”

“Our commitment to youth mental well-being is focused on prevention and early intervention programs that help provide young people timely access to knowledge, supports, and care — when and where they need it,” said Valerie Chort, vice-president of corporate citizenship at RBC. “Through our support of this new national standard, we are proud to be helping post-secondary institutions continue to develop these important resources and supports for students’ mental health.”

The Standard follows the success of the National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, a framework developed by the MHCC and its partners in 2013 to provide a systemic approach to supporting positive mental health in the workplace.

The Standard is based on the firm belief that all of Canada's post-secondary institutions can be change agents in mental health — an objective they are already working toward.

Of the more than 2 million people enrolled in Canadian post-secondary institutions, almost 70% are 24 or under, a demographic particularly susceptible to developing mental health issues.

More than 60 per cent of students felt “more than average” to “tremendous” stress, according to the 2019 National College Health Assessment. More than half felt so depressed they had a hard time functioning, and 16 per cent had seriously considered suicide. Three in four mental illnesses are first diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 24, when many people are in or just out of post-secondary education.

Read what people are saying:

“It’s wonderful to see all the initiatives and best practices that we have implemented at Carleton over the years be captured in The National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students. More than ever, mental health and wellness need to be at the core of University life. We would like to thank everyone involved in the development of this national standard as we all work together across the country to enhance the mental health and well-being of our students.”

- Suzanne Blanchard, vice-president (students and enrolment) at Carleton University

“Canada’s universities are dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellness of their students and are committed to working in partnership to tackle this complex and pervasive issue. We welcome this national Standard as a valuable new tool to help institutions and front-line staff continue their essential work to support student well-being.”

- Paul Davidson, president of Universities Canada

“The mental health and well-being of students is of utmost importance to colleges and institutes. We welcome the national Standard as an additional tool to support the existing post-secondary practices and services that help students flourish and be successful.”

- Denise Amyot, president and CEO of Colleges and Institutes Canada

"Adapting to post-secondary is challenging under usual circumstances. Creating new relationships, dealing with ongoing financial strain, and constantly being evaluated are a few of the difficulties' students can face. The added dynamic of the COVID-19 learning environment adds another layer of stress and uncertainty for students across the country. Now more than ever, we need a cohesive movement to ensure the mental health and well-being of students are considered and supported at every level."

- Daniel Major, post-secondary student at Mount Royal University and member of the Standard Technical Committee

To download the document, click [here](#).

**The Canadian Federation of Students** has created a [fact sheet for student wellness during COVID-19](#) as a resource to help students manage their mental health along with their studies during COVID-19. The factsheet is separated into five categories: Mental Health Risks

Associated with COVID-19, Coping with Stress and Anxiety, Studying from Home, Impacts on Graduate Students and Student Research, and Keep Busy and Beat Boredom.

**The National Graduate Caucus (NGC) of the Canadian Federation of Students** engaged in a one-year research project to develop a graduate student mental health toolkit. It aims to equip graduate student' communities to evaluate and improve the state of graduate students' mental health and wellbeing at post-secondary institutions in Canada. Click [here](#) to check out the Graduate Students Mental Health and Wellbeing Toolkit.

### **Other Useful Mental Health Resources:**

- The Mental Health Commission of Canada
  - [MHCC Covid-19 Resources](#)
  - [Document \(PDF\)](#) of the mental health continuum model
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
  - [COVID-19 FAQ and Additional Resources](#)
  - [Quarantine and Isolation](#)
  - [COVID-19 National Survey Dashboard](#)
- Government of Canada
  - [Taking care of your mental and physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- Post-Secondary
  - [Student Mental Health and Self-Care in the Age of COVID-19](#)
  - [Good2Talk](#)
  - [Educators during COVID-19](#)

## Future of Campus Life

Post-secondary institutions are continuing to figure out how best to adapt to social distancing and pandemic health measures, while organizing and ensuring they can accommodate student needs. This section spotlights reopening plans for a variety of post-secondary schools – including their accessibility centres, organized by region.

A [survey](#) commissioned by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) in spring 2020 showed that a significant number of students were reconsidering their plans for university and college in the fall semester, citing lost income, limited support, and concerns about the quality of remote learning.

“Students and their families are worried about their health, the financial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the uncertainty about how classes will be taught in the fall,” said CAUT Executive Director David Robinson. “Among those students who say they will still be able to afford their tuition fees and living costs, a large number — about 75 per cent — are worried that distance learning will create a poor learning experience.”

The survey of both graduating high-school students and returning post-secondary students reveals:

- Seven in ten say their summer employment plans have been negatively affected by COVID-19;  
30 per cent of returning and new students might change their plans about enrolling at a post-secondary institution in the fall;
- 

One in two says that COVID-19 has made it more difficult to afford tuition and living costs; Over two thirds of students say their personal finances and those of their parents or family have been affected by the pandemic.

CFS National Chairperson Sofia Descalzi commented that lack of affordability is affecting some students more than others, with 85 per cent of those reconsidering plans for their fall education saying reducing or eliminating tuition would be central to assisting their return.

“It is clear that already marginalized populations are being affected disproportionately by the situation, with a larger number of women and those identifying as visible minorities saying it will be harder to afford post-secondary,” Descalzi noted. “Even with government supports in place — such as the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) and changes to grants and loans — the stark reality is that many students will not be able to swing higher education come fall and, if they do, many students will have to increase their debt levels even more.”

The survey was conducted by Abacus Data with 1,100 high school and post-secondary students in Canada, aged 17 and older, from April 23 to May 1, 2020. The sample included 300 graduating high-school students and 800 post-secondary students.

### [What's the future of university campuses? An architect asks 50 post-secondary stakeholders, and here's what they said.](#)

In the article linked above architect Jay Deshmukh asks 50 post-secondary stakeholders across the world about the future of university campuses, and finds that post-secondary education as we know it would have to undergo massive changes – such as off-campus life, school to work (co-op), economic considerations, degree requirements, and more.

The fundamental question the architect asks is “Has COVID-19 killed the campus?” It can be said that COVID-19 has disrupted the post-secondary experience. The community that students build, the independence they gain from leaving the nest, the lifelong friendships built and figuring out lifepath decisions cannot be done in the same way online. Deshmukh believes that COVID-19, “has set campuses around the world on a path of uneven evolution, with the risk of shedding the good with the extraneous without eyes-wide-open rethinking and responsive planning” (Deshmukh, 2020). Deshmukh explores didactic learning, commenting that certain lectures can easily be adapted to online learning, whereas there are lectures that cannot be adapted easily or at all to the online space. He talks of “hands off, hands on” learning and the times when it is needed, such as experiential learning which requires learning by doing (courses in science, technology, art and design, for example). Read more of Jay Deshmukh’s thoughts on the changes to campus life and student learning [here](#) (PDF).

## Ontario

The University of Toronto (U of T) announced plans to open to students in the fall 2020 semester, with limited capacity in classrooms. The re-opening plans included up to 25% maximum occupancy, meaning that a lecture hall originally intended to hold 800 students would have a new capacity of 200 students, a professor, and a TA in a closed room with one to four exits. This raised questions around how social distancing measures could be upheld with that number of students in a classroom.

Many voiced concerns with U of T’s reopening plan. In the article, [U of T comes under criticism for reopening plan](#), Professor David Fisman posted his concerns to Twitter after learning U of T’s reopening plan. He states, “The decision on how courses should be taught, including the decision to push faculty to teach in person has been delegated to individual faculties,” including “Some faculties are pressuring profs to teach in person.” Fisman explained that students would have the option of participating in online or in-person classes but would not be able to change this choice over the course of the term. Fisman also states that while students choosing to learn online would be supported while doing so, faculty in various departments aren’t provided with the same level of aid by individual department chairs (Miller, 2020).

Six University of Toronto unions launched a petition against the school's reopening plan. This [CBC article](#) states that the petition reads "Until the safety of students and workers can be guaranteed, in-person learning, teaching, librarianship, and other academic work should be paused, those of us who can work remotely should stay home to protect the entire campus community" (CBC, 2020).

At the end of the BlogTO article, Fishman states, "If being extremely concerned about unsafe opening plans that endanger colleagues, students and staff makes me uncollegial, so be it, I suppose. Sorry."

Despite concerns raised by students and faculty regarding the Fall 2020 reopening for 25% capacity per classroom, on March 4<sup>th</sup>, U of T announced that they have plans to return to in-person learning and activities for the Fall 2021 semester (Cheryl Regehr, Hannah-Moffat, & Mabury, 2021). The letter states, ""We are looking forward, with optimism, to fall 2021 when people can once more gather on our campuses, as permitted by public health guidelines." However, U of T also noted that "we can return to existing practices should they be required". The letter does not mention whether online courses will still be available in the Fall 2021 semester if in-person learning is to return. Furthermore, "The university has updated its [in-class instruction](#) and [general workplace](#) guidelines to prepare for a safe gradual return to campus. Additionally, the university is [hosting a vaccine clinic](#) at UTM and has plans for hosting clinics at the other two campuses as well" (Anteblian, 2021).

## Pacific & Yukon Region

The province of British Columbia released a plan on how to move forward during COVID-19 in the fall 2020 semester for post-secondary students. Melanie Mark, Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, released the [document](#), detailing the guidance post-secondary schools have been given to protect and support students during these unusual times. The guide notes that each institution will develop its own safety plan, which will not be reviewed or approved by WorkSafeBC. This enables a multitude of different specifications regarding safe distancing measures amongst BC post-secondary institutions. However, institutions must undergo an inspection – conducted by WorkSafeBC – concerning the steps and protocols institutions have put in place for their individual social distancing plans.

## Atlantic Region

The CTV News article [Northern student quarantines for studies in Atlantic Canada](#) notes that Atlantic provinces were operating under an 'Atlantic bubble' as of fall 2020, with travel permitted to and from Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, but closed off to the rest of the country (Roberts, 2020). Atlantic universities, like those in other regions, have expressed concern with the long-term economic impact of COVID-

19 and call upon the federal government to invest in the infrastructure of Atlantic post-secondary institutions.

In the opinion article, *Atlantic Universities calling on federal government for cash infusion for post-COVID infrastructure projects*, Peter Halpin, Executive Director of the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU), notes that universities must balance physical infrastructure priorities “with the rapidly emerging need for digital infrastructure to transition classes and programs online until mass vaccination has occurred and a safe return to campus can be achieved” (Telegram, 2021). The AAU advocates for a renewal of a federal campus infrastructure as part of economic recovery, and over 90% of Atlantic Canadians support a federal government investment in campus infrastructure renewal. The CBC article, [Minister makes no promise to N.B. universities after call for emergency funding](#), notes that “the University of New Brunswick, St. Thomas University, the University of Moncton and Mount Allison University have asked the province for total of \$10.6 million in addition to what they normally receive.” New Brunswick Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training, said he understands the request, but was unable to confirm whether the universities would be granted emergency funding and the request would be considered as part of the budgeting process “like any other requests” (CBC, 2021).

## **Prairies and Northern Region**

The University of Alberta announced plans to increase the number of students allowed back on campus for the Fall 2021 semester while following a blended model of online learning and in-person classes. In their [statement](#), the university acknowledges that a full return onto campus is unlikely due to COVID-19, however there is a plan to increase the number of students and faculty on campus in the fall. The university expressed optimism that the vaccine rollout will encourage safe face-to-face undergraduate and graduate courses, research, and related support services across their campus. The university does plan to give smaller classes larger spaces to work in, to enable physical distancing rules (Dew, 2021).

## **Quebec**

Quebec was recently given the green light to reopen post-secondary campuses, with in-person classes one day a week (Fletcher, 2021). In announcing the plan to reopen, the government of Quebec expressed concern about the mental health of students during isolation. While in-person classes would ease barriers of online communication, many students are concerned about their physical health around other students who would be travelling all over the province. In a [Global News](#) article, Dawson College student Spencer Beaulne voiced concerns regarding in-person classes, stating “I feel like it would be not healthy because we’d be bringing in students from all over. I don’t even come from the city. I come from the Eastern Townships.” However, the article states that the government reassures students that they would be able to continue with their online studies if they wish (Fletcher, 2021).

McGill plans a return to campus in September 2021. A [statement](#) released by the university states that online components will still be used for learning, but the university plans to return to regular on-campus learning for students and teachers. Student residences are also planned to be open in fall 2021, with usual guaranteed accommodation for all first-year students (McGuill, 2021).

Concordia University [continued online learning for the Summer 2021](#) term, and plans to release more information regarding the fall 2021 semester towards the end of spring (Montreal Gazette, 2021).

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