



2021–2022 Priority Themes Consultation Information Package

UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

What does this process entail?

Members are responsible for selecting priorities for the organization on a yearly basis; this is the process by which CASA sets its agenda and determines what direction our advocacy and research will take over the coming year.. Members will be asked to prioritize certain areas of importance in the scope of post-secondary education by selecting broad themes. Those themes become our “priorities” for the year. From these priorities, the organization can develop projects to undertake during the membership year. By the end of the process, members will have set a concrete agenda for themselves.

Defining important terms

Before you learn about the priority selection process below, you should have a good understanding of the following concepts:

- **Themes:** These are broad issue areas that students encounter within the post-secondary education system at the federal level. Examples of these thematic areas could include; financial assistance, student employment, research, international education and much more. Many of them are addressed by specific policies in CASA’s policy manual.
- **Priority Themes:** Delegates will participate in the creation of priority themes, which come from the thematic areas they’ve already identified. Once delegates have identified the themes they would like to prioritize, they take the form of priority themes. These become the organization’s main priorities for the year, and will dictate the direction we take throughout our operations.
- **Projects:** Priority themes selected by membership are still macro-focused and large in scope. These can then be narrowed down to specific “tasks”, otherwise known as a project. The concrete actions CASA plans to take in 2021–2022 will



be primarily directed by these thematic priorities. These actions may take the shape of governmental advocacy, campaigns, research papers, or other vehicles to push the agenda identified by the membership. Before, during, and after the Policy and Strategy conference, the Board of Directors, committees, delegates, and Home Office staff will all play a role in shaping concrete projects from the list of priority themes that the membership will have determined.

DETERMINING PRIORITY THEMES FOR 2021-2022

The following steps are involved in the priority theme determination process:

Step 1 - Initial brainstorm:

Members brainstorm at Foundations Conference, identifying themes which impact their students..

Step 2 - Board discussion and determination of theme options:

Using the discussions from Foundations Conference and Home Office staff recommendations, the Board of Directors will approve an initial list of themes that the members can consider in the prioritization of themes for 2021-2022.

Step 3 - Consultation process:

Delegates will fill out a questionnaire that will help the Board of Directors make an assessment and shortlist themes. This survey will be circulated throughout August, beginning at the Policy and Strategy Conference and ending on **August 27, 2021**. Committee Chairs will also be engaged for feedback pertinent to their respective committees. These Committee Chairs will be encouraged to incorporate identified themes in their committee work throughout the year. Please see below to view details of the consultation process.

Step 4 - Shortlisting themes:

Once the Board of Directors has consulted with the membership, Home Office staff will compile the consultation results. The Board will then make a determination on a list of final themes for the membership's consideration and approval, and do a final check in with all members before the September e-Plenary Conference in order to discuss what came out of the consultation process. The Board will shortlist themes based on members' opinions and other important membership considerations. Committees can begin to use the proposed themes to help develop their work plans for the coming year.



Step 5 - Approval of the final list of priority themes:

At the September e-Plenary Conference, delegates will discuss the themes selected, and will approve a final list of priority themes.

Step 6 - Implementation:

Following the e-Plenary, the Board of Directors, committees, and Home Office will work together to ensure that CASA continues working on completing the projects outlined in the committee work plans and Board Action Plan. Additional projects may be developed and assigned throughout the year by the Board of Directors. This may include identifying and developing advocacy opportunities, research or policy projects, campaigns that respond to developing opportunities or challenges faced by the organization.

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Membership consultation, as outlined above in **Step 3**, is an important component of our priority selection process. It allows each member to have a voice throughout the process and ensures the member-driven approach CASA strives for. This consultation process follows three stages.

- i) Once members receive their *Priority Theme Determination* information package, the Board of Directors will reach each member to clarify the process and discuss the initial list of themes within a board liaison call. This ensures that all members understand the process and that everyone is fully briefed on the themes they are being asked to prioritize.
- ii) Members will then fill out the consultation questionnaire with themes they would like to prioritize. The questionnaire presents a set of quantitative and qualitative questions to help the Board make a proper determination.
- iii) Throughout this process, the Board of Directors will check in with each member through the Board liaison calls and will take note of the member's selection, comments, concerns, and other important considerations. The Board will then compile the information gathered throughout the entire consultation process and will be better equipped to make a determination on a list of themes that reflect the membership's perspectives.



Questionnaire Example

Please complete the following questionnaire as thoroughly as possible by **Friday, August 27, 2021**.

Question 1: Please rate the following themes in order of importance for prioritization (1 being the theme you would most prioritize, and 8 being the theme you would least prioritize). See full appendix of themes and what they entail.

- i. Theme 1
- ii. Theme 2
- iii. Theme 3
- iv. Theme 4
- v. Theme 5
- vi. Theme 6
- vii. Theme 7
- viii. Theme 8

Your ranking

- 1) -----
- 2) -----
- 3) -----
- 4) -----
- 5) -----
- 6) -----
- 7) -----
- 8) -----

Question X: Please provide any additional commentary that you wish to express to the Board regarding the process, the themes, or any other important Board considerations for your association.



APPENDIX: POLICY THEMES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Here is the list of policy themes presented to the Board, along with a few examples (among many others) of policy asks that could be included within each individual theme. The examples do not make an exhaustive list of potential policy asks and do not guarantee what may be put forward. The order of the list is also not reflective of internal priority, rather the order in which they came up during discussions at the 2021 Foundations Conference.

1. Student Financial Aid

What we heard: Almost everyone emphasized the challenges posed in paying for their education. After a year of studying and living during a pandemic, these challenges have only worsened, both as a result of increasing tuition fees and a lack of necessary support. While there is understandable frustration surrounding increases in tuition, our members are more concerned with enhancing awareness of available resources and ensuring that this funding is equitably distributed. The specific ideas raised include: taking living expenses into account for loans and grants; developing targeted aid for international students; permanently removing spousal income from the Canada Student Financial Aid Program needs assessment process; and, creating dedicated funding for students with children. Overall, the goal of the membership seems to be centred on removing systemic barriers to funding and ensuring a level playing field for all those choosing to study in Canada.

Details: Students' ability to pay for education up-front is still one of the largest barriers to accessing post-secondary. CASA has a plethora of recommendations in this area, as it's one of the areas in post-secondary where the federal government has a clearly defined role through programs such as the Canada Student Financial Aid Program, which administers Canada Student Loans/Grants, Apprenticeship Loans/Grants, and the Repayment Assistance Plan, as well as the Canada Education Savings Program. Average student debt in Canada is over \$26,000 and climbing. In recent years, the federal government has taken action to address accessibility and affordability by expanding the Canada Student Grant for low and middle income families, creating a Skills Boost Grant to support lifelong learning, and expanded support for students with disabilities. In the COVID-19 response, Canada Student Grants were doubled to a maximum of \$6000 for 2020-2021, the weekly loan maximum was increased to \$350 per week, and parental and spousal contributions would be removed. The doubling of the Canada Student Grant was renewed for two more years in the 2021 Federal Budget, but the permanency is still in question. It must be noted as well that presently, graduate students are largely left out of other federal aid, including Canada Student Grants. This lack of funding is hugely problematic and can lead to an array of associated problems. As graduate degrees become increasingly common and necessary to join the workforce, more must be done to



support graduate students.

In CASA's Policy Manual, there are three primary approaches to addressing accessibility and affordability issues with financial aid: (1) enhancing saving for education pre-study; (2) providing upfront aid to cover the cost of education during study; and, (3) providing flexibility on repayment to help control debt loads. With some provinces recently rolling back needs-based grants, the topic of student financial aid is as relevant today as it's ever been.

Example of Actionables:

CASA recommends that the federal government create a Canada Student Grant for Graduate Students with high financial need to be valued at \$3,000 per year. *While the Canada Student Grant is doubled, CASA would ask for the creation to be equal to that of the current Grant.*

CASA recommends that a portion of the Canada Student Grant be targeted at reducing or capping the amount of debt a student accumulates throughout their studies.

CASA recommends that the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant be expanded to support students in all years of their apprenticeship education.

CASA recommends that the federal government work with provinces to provide information about the Canada Education Savings Plan upon birth of a child with the goal of increasing uptake of the Canada Learning Bond.

CASA recommends that the federal government lower interest rates with the final goal of eliminating any interest paid on Canada Student Loans.

CASA recommends that the federal government exempt borrowers taking parental leave from being required to make loan payments.

2. Student Employment

What we heard: As many noted, student work opportunities took a significant hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both in-study and summer work was reduced, leading to a variety of problems, ranging from less money available for school to the inability to form professional networks to aid in post-graduation job searches. Discussions also focused on the impact that job loss can have on mental health, as financial insecurity is one of the leading drivers of mental health challenges. While the new funding announced in the 2021 Federal Budget appears positive, students are still worried that it will not be enough to compensate for the losses seen in the



past year. Overall, students want to work, there just aren't enough (well paying) opportunities.

Details: Many students in Canada attend post-secondary education with the intention of leveraging their education to find better employment upon graduation. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth unemployment rate was nearly double the national average. However, the pandemic has severely impacted student employment rates. In May 2020, the unemployment rate for returning students was 40%. While it has decreased somewhat in May 2021 to 23.1%, it is still well above the 13.7% rate from May 2019. Further, even before 2020, underemployment was common and recent graduates found themselves in jobs that didn't match their skill sets. This remains true today. Exposure to work opportunities while in study is a proven way to increase the likelihood a student will be employed, as it allows them to mix theory with practice and partake in necessary networking. These types of opportunities were all but wiped out for the duration of the pandemic. The federal government has acted to address youth employment concerns by expanding the Canada Summer Jobs program, funding the Youth Employment Strategy, producing a report on the topic by the Expert Panel on Youth Employment, and has funded work-integrated learning with the goal of creating over 100,000 new jobs for students.

Examples of Actionables:

CASA recommends that the federal government expand the Canada Summer Jobs program to provide part-time work placements during the school year.

CASA recommends that the federal government continues to pursue the goal of 100% work-integrated learning by opening up opportunities to international students.

3. International Students

What we heard: Much of the membership expressed concern over the unequal treatment of international students when compared to their domestic colleagues. Areas of concern include: higher tuition rates, inability to access employment opportunities, mental health challenges related to distance from family/support networks, and the challenges with remaining in Canada upon graduation. A common theme was that international students face many of the same challenges as their domestic counterparts, but receive almost no support from the federal government. This unequal treatment could lead to international students choosing to study elsewhere, which would have significant impacts for Canadian institutions.

Details: The number of international students studying in Canada has increased dramatically over the last decade, and there are almost 500,000 international students in Canada. This has certainly had a positive impact on Canadian



campuses as international students bring enriching perspectives and experiences. Beyond campuses, in 2018, international students contributed \$21.6 billion to the Canadian economy. International education is expensive though, and the increase in international student fees is majorly outpacing both domestic fee increases and government contributions to education. Indeed, in 2018–2019, international fees accounted for 13% of total system income. For the high price they pay, international students also face a lack of financial aid accessible to them, barriers to participating in the workforce, and struggles with the immigration system if they want to stay in Canada. Amid the COVID-19 response, international students were not eligible for most supports, including the Canada Emergency Student Benefit, Canada Summer Jobs, and Canada Student Loan Program supports. For the value, both financial and non-financial, that international students bring to Canada, more needs to be done to enrich their experience.

Example of Actionables:

CASA recommends that the federal government modify the conditions for student permits to allow international students to participate in co-op or internships without the need to obtain a separate work permit.

CASA recommends that the federal government extend the post-graduate job-search period from 90 days to 6 months.

CASA recommends that the federal government award Express Entry (EE) points for volunteer and community service positions to international students in recognition of the cultural integration and social value these experiences bring to Canadian communities.

CASA recommends that the federal government prioritize Temporary Residence Visa and work permits for spouses/partners of international students

4. Mental Health

What we heard: For reasons ranging from financial insecurity to loneliness to anxiety about the unknown, the past year has been extraordinarily hard on students' mental health and wellbeing. In discussions, members highlighted that the lack of in-person contact has proven particularly difficult for students. This not only cuts them off from formal support services (such as counselling), but also from informal support networks. This has had a negative impact on the student experience as a whole. However, discussions also emphasized that the state of mental health support prior to the pandemic was also totally unacceptable. Long wait times, lack of available services, and a feeling of abandonment define much of the narrative surrounding on-campus mental health supports.



Details: Mental health is a growing problem on Canadian post-secondary campuses. Students undergo a lot of academic, financial, and general life stress. On top of that, the average post-secondary student is the prime age for mental illnesses to manifest. Students also live on semester schedules with tight timelines that don't allow for much flexibility if time is required to deal with mental health issues. This summer, students finally got a first recognition that mental health can create real barriers to post-secondary education when the Canada Student Loan Program added stackable medical leave, which includes mental health, that students can take for 6 months, up to a maximum of 18 months without entering repayment. This is a strong first step, but a lot more needs to be done on Canadian campuses to increase flexibility, accommodation, service delivery, and issues with stigma.

Example of Actionables:

CASA recommends that the federal government amend its definition of permanent disability outlined in Canada's Student Financial Assistance Regulations to reflect and respond to the diverse needs of students, including the accommodation needs of students with mental health problems and illnesses.

CASA recommends that the federal government provide targeted funding at existing and new mental health initiatives, supports, and accessibility tools on Canadian campuses.

CASA recommends that the federal government increase mental health investments in accordance with the MHCC's funding proposals outlined in its Canadian mental health strategy.

5. Indigenous Learners

What we heard: Whether it takes the form of improved funding opportunities, expanded digital infrastructure to reach rural communities, or dedicated support programs, there is a clear and strong desire to improve the quality of post-secondary education for Indigenous learners. Recognizing the colonial history of post-secondary education, discussions included the need for mental health support, full acceptance of UNDRIP, a need for indigenization of schools, challenges of representation in leadership, the full implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and a need for decolonization - including at CASA.

Details: Indigenous Peoples in Canada face the largest barriers to accessing post-secondary education. There is a severe lack of financial aid available to indigenous students to reduce financial barriers. Indigenous students also tend to live in rural and remote areas far from post-secondary institutions, creating a larger



financial barrier than other students may face, and also forces students to leave their communities and move far away to pursue post-secondary education. Due to the ongoing and historical atrocities committed against Indigenous Peoples, barriers are larger than just finance and distance, and immense efforts need to be placed on improving the situation for Indigenous Peoples so that attending post-secondary can be a possibility for everyone who wishes to pursue one. In the context of the on-going “discoveries” of unmarked graves at residential schools, calls are stronger than ever for justice and reconciliation, which includes answering the calls put forth in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Example of Actionables:

CASA endorses the educational components of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, and calls on the federal government to fully address these calls.

CASA recommends the federal government adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. CASA further recommends that the federal government, following the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, make the necessary investments to support the implementation of the Rights there within.

6. Student Housing

What we heard: Ensuring that students have access to affordable, quality housing is a concern for many. Though often viewed as a localized problem, the damage caused by absence of a safe place to call home is universal. Unlike so many of the issues CASA deals with, housing is presented as fairly straightforward: students need a place to live, but there simply are not enough places for them. Finding a way to unify this dialogue emerged across the membership.

Details: Housing is one of the larger expenses students face in the pursuit of post-secondary education, sometimes even surpassing the cost of tuition itself. There is a very limited federal role in student housing, as the National Housing Strategy does not consider student housing as part of the plan. However, the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program can make its need assessments and financial aid levels to better help students afford local housing costs.

Example of Actionables:

CASA does not have developed policy stances on student housing as it is predominantly within municipal or provincial jurisdiction.

7. Educational Materials and OERs



What we heard: There is a clear and obvious desire to see the use of OERs expanded at all institutions. OERs can help drive down the cost of education, improve access, diversify the voice heard in the classroom, and bolster existing content. However, their implementation is not as smooth or straightforward, as expressed by students from institutions that have adopted OERs and other open textbooks. One major red flag is that while OERs are often sold as a way to reduce fees, many institutions do not actually lower fees when implementing OERs. Further, the licenses given to students tend to be limited, meaning that they only have access to the OER while enrolled in a particular course. This can be especially problematic for college and polytechnic students, where course material often doubles as an on-the-job resource. Accordingly, while OERs have the potential to be immensely helpful for students, how they are implemented and distributed is an important consideration.

Details: Textbooks and other educational materials are a necessary expense for students to academically succeed. That being said, they are expensive and can easily cost a student anywhere between \$500 and \$1,000 a year depending on the field of study. Educational materials vary by discipline as well, with classroom based programs relying on text materials, and more experiential based learning opportunities, like those found in many colleges and polytechnics, relying on equipment used by students to convey an educational experience. Either way, more needs to be done to reduce barriers to educational materials. The Standing Committee on Finance recommended in their 2018 pre-budget report that Canada's Granting Agencies create an envelope of funding for the development of Open Educational Resources. Further, the Standing Committee on Industry, Science, and Technology recommended that the *Copyright Act* maintain a fair dealing exemption for education. On the college and polytechnic front, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development has recommended that the Government of Canada explore financial incentives to reduce financial barriers to apprenticeships that come with high cost of entry for materials. This is all in tandem with ongoing litigation and appeals about fair dealing and copyright.

Example of Actionables:

CASA recommends that the federal government create a fund with Canada's Tri-Agencies that will be used for the development of OERs across the country.

CASA recommends that the federal government exempt textbooks from the Government Sales Tax or the federal portion of the Harmonized Sales Tax.

CASA recommends that the federal government protect "education" as a component of Fair Dealing in the Copyright Act.



CASA recommends that the maximum amount for a Tradesperson Tool Deduction to be increased from \$500 to \$1000 to help apprentices afford the cost of their equipment.

8. Student Research

What we heard: This theme captures a couple of connected conversations surrounding the need for support of student research, including at the Graduate level. First, there is a clear desire for expanded funding opportunities. This includes both an expansion of funding through the Tri-Council Agencies, as well as new funding outside of them. Many feel as though STEM research is prioritized and that not enough is being done to support non-STEM researchers. Further, funding needs to be increased overall, since student work far outpaces the funding received. Second, more funding is needed that is not tied directly to research. Currently, graduate students are largely excluded from student financial aid, particularly grants. Not only do graduate students share many of the same living expenses, but the intensity of their programs make working while in-study (beyond academic-based work) difficult.

Details: Engaging in research is a key academic experience and builds valuable skills for the workforce, in multiple disciplines. That said, too few students in Canada can readily access research funds whether that be at the graduate and undergraduate levels in a university, or applied research in a college or polytechnic. The vast majority of financial support is tied directly to research and distributed through the Tri-Council Agencies. These three groups hold annual competitions to determine which students will receive funding; however, the number of recipients represents a fraction of the total student population. Exact numbers are hard to pin down, but a safe estimate is that less than 15% of graduate students receive Tri-Council funding. This number will likely decrease as graduate level programs shift away from being research focused towards more professional or applied programs. Student-led and directed research can encounter funding difficulties not only at the graduate level, but also undergraduate and at colleges and polytechnics.

Example of Actionables:

CASA recommends that the federal government create granting opportunities that will directly fund student's aspirations to develop their own applied research projects.



CASA recommends that the number of Canada Graduate Scholarships in Canada be increased so that a minimum of 10% of all eligible graduate students receive support.

Smaller ask (same policy): The growth of CGS available should match the growth of the Masters and PhD graduate student population annually.

CASA recommends that the federal government mandate official student positions (for an active student researcher) on each of the councils governing the tri-agencies, any committees dealing with programs for student researchers, or any selection committees which will award undergraduate or graduate awards, fellowships, and scholarships.

9. Digital Infrastructure and Online Learning

What we heard: As expected, the past year has presented novel and unique challenges for students. After the sudden shift to online learning in Spring 2020, students were apprehensive about conducting an entire academic year virtually. Many of these concerns rested on the inaccessibility of online learning to those living in rural areas, those without the necessary technology, and those that rely on campuses and their resources to complete their studies. As we begin the return to campus, the lessons learned from this past year ought to be codified into a standard for online learning to avoid the pitfalls faced. On the flip side, there was also some discussion about those that enjoyed or benefited from the flexibility of online learning. More should be done to integrate the features they enjoyed and work should potentially be done to allow such students to continue learning remotely/digitally.

Details: Digital infrastructure has long been crucial to the delivery of post-secondary education in Canada, both for students in physical classrooms and for those participating through distance education. With the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, entire programs were pivoted to online and distance education with mere days' notice. This response has demonstrated the challenges and shortcomings in 'digital infrastructure,' which covers a range of things including internet access, data, hardware and software, as well as the technical mechanisms needed to enable all of these pieces to work together. As digital infrastructure is now paramount amid online learning, concerns around access to the internet, and thus online and distance learning, have become even more significant. A significant 'digital divide' exists in Canada, where some areas (largely in or near urban centres) have far better access to a quality internet connection than others. The federal government has made commitments about ensuring all Canadians have 100% access to high speed internet, CASA supports this initiative being given priority amid the COVID-19



response to ensure that students are able to access post-secondary education in a digital environment.

Example of Actionables:

CASA recommends that digital facilities, installations, services and software be considered of equal importance to physical infrastructure in terms of federal post-secondary infrastructure granting programs.

CASA recommends the federal government work to ensure that all Canadians have access to affordable broadband, an essential component of distance learning, and that broadband access in rural and remote areas is continuously reviewed, supported and maintained.