

# Intelligence MEMOS



From: Don Drummond  
To: Post-secondary Policymakers  
Date: April 6, 2020  
Re: **COVID-19 AND UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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There are more than [2 million university and college students](#) in Canada. Their face-to-face classes were among the first casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As students and instructors quickly adapt to remote learning platforms, their attention will increasingly turn to what is next.

The timing of the pandemic could not be worse for student incomes. Normally about half a million graduating students would be joining the work force in what might have been the beginning of careers. For others, it would have been co-op placements or summer employment. All are now in jeopardy.

A policy response is necessary to protect the post-secondary students.

[Studies](#) show that students graduating into weak labour markets suffer long-term consequences. Their skills atrophy. They lose a few rungs on career ladders. Employers look with suspicion at lack of experience. They often take jobs not well aligned with their interests and training and find it difficult to get back on the track they intended.

This all suggests the policy response must focus on income preservation and maintenance, if not enhancement, of skills so that students' actual income and earnings potential are protected.

The most effective policy response to support students is to do everything feasible to contain COVID-19 so there can be an early return to what would have been normal activities over the spring and summer. However, those activities are likely to be disrupted for some time and other actions are called for.

Five recommendations to support post-secondary education students:

1. Students whose job offer has vanished should be made eligible for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). In effect this would mean treating foregone income as lost. The agreement might be a formal, legal job offer or it could confirmation from a would-be employer.
2. Funds should be made available to universities and colleges to make more courses available remotely over the next several months. Universities already offered some courses online, but are scrambling to convert many others. The course coverage and [quality](#) of the remote learning modules would be enhanced with additional support over the coming weeks and months. Efforts could be made to attract revenues from international students, who pay \$6 billion of tuition per year, which is now jeopardized. More and better online courses would not only help through the pandemic but would be an investment for the future as it seems likely more education will shift to this format.
3. Funds should be made available to university and college instructors to hire student researchers and teaching assistants. The easiest transition into employment is in the post-secondary education environment where the students have already established a connection rather than trying to enter a new workplace remotely. The additional research capacity would benefit society in many ways. Graduate students could be used to help universities and colleges with the task of converting learning platforms to remote modes.
4. Funds could be made available to school districts to hire post-secondary students as assistants to teachers. Over the past two weeks, teachers across Canada have been told that in very short order they must prepare online learning modules for their students. In many cases little guidance or co-ordination is being provided. Many parents are also struggling with how to best bring online learning into their homes. Who better to help than college and university students?
5. Additional funding for scholarships will be required for students by next September. Even with the programs recommended above, many students will suffer an income loss that could jeopardize their return to studies. Loan programs could be adjusted, but we should be leery of piling more debt on students. If history repeats, they may already suffer longer-term income losses as a result of the pandemic. Further, they may disproportionately bear the cost of the return to fiscal normalcy through higher taxes and contributions. So additional support should be more in the form of scholarships or grants.

Together the five programs would mitigate the harm that is going to fall on Canada's university and college students and generate benefits for society. As it will be for other Canadians, it is still going to be a tough time for students.

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