

Statement by Kaley Kennedy, Nova Scotia Representative for the Canadian Federation of Students

This new GPI report on Education Indicators once again highlights the barriers that students face in accessing postsecondary education in Nova Scotia. The report confirms that affordable and accessible post-secondary education has failed to be a priority in Nova Scotia with tuition fees and student debt rising significantly over the past several years. The report shows that tuition and other student fees also now make up a much larger share of university revenues nationwide than ever before, doubling from 18% of operating revenues in 1972 to 36% in 2005, while the government share has declined proportionately. Most disturbingly, the GPI report shows that increases in student debt are affecting lower-income students most, with the poorest 20% of Canadian households now accounting for 50% of total outstanding student debt.

High graduate debt loads are also a societal concern because they lower the rate of return for society investing in higher education—narrowing career options, preventing students from purchasing homes or starting new businesses, and often forcing students to leave the province. Because they are under intense pressure to pay off student loans, graduates often avoid socially beneficial careers in fields like social work, rural medicine, and international development, because they don't pay as much as corporate jobs.

This GPI report also shows that graduates are taking longer than ever to pay off their student debts, and it notes that the prolonged stress and financial pressures of loan repayment can adversely affect their health, wellbeing and quality of life for years to come. The report also provides information on the increasingly long work hours that many students (particularly with lower incomes) have to put in to finance their studies—giving them less time to study and compromising their academic performance.

What the numbers show is that the government must do more to address the student debt crisis in this province and ensure that no one is shut out of a Nova Scotia university because they cannot afford it. Last year, the province froze tuition for the first time, and gave some relief to permanent residents of Nova Scotia (though more than 14,000 university students in Nova Scotia still did not see any relief.) In the face of continuing high tuition fees and inadequate financial aid, these measures are simply not enough. The government should immediately reduce tuition fees for all students and create a generous system of needs-based grants to help reverse the disturbing trends outlined in this report.