

CFNU

CANADIAN
FEDERATION
OF NURSES
UNIONS

May 2025

Investing in the future:

Eliminating financial barriers
for nursing students

Eyasu Yakob



About the CFNU

The CFNU is Canada’s largest nurses’ organization, representing frontline unionized nurses and nursing students in every sector of health care – from home care and long-term care to community and acute care – and advocating on key priorities to strengthen public health care across the country.

Land acknowledgement

From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis and First Nations Peoples that call this land home. The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People. As settlers and visitors, we feel it’s important to acknowledge the importance of these lands, which we each call home. We do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to improve relationships between nations, to work towards healing the wounds of colonialism and to improve our own understanding of local Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

About the author

Eyasu Yakob is a recent nursing graduate from the University of Alberta. During his studies, he served as president of the Canadian Nursing Students’ Association and sat on the boards of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions and the Canadian Nurses Association.

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Message from Linda Silas, CFNU President

With Canada short 34,000 nurses (Statistics Canada, 2025) and forecasting models expecting the situation to get worse (Calder et al., 2024), it has never been more important to attract students to nursing programs and ensure that they have the supports to graduate and transition into a career in the public health care system.

However, nursing students face significant financial barriers to completing their education. Tuition costs, combined with expenses for books, equipment and transportation, strain many students' finances and can put graduation out of reach for lower-income students already struggling with the high cost of living.

Nursing students have long voiced concerns about the need for better financial support. Both the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) (CFNU Resolutions Committee, 2021) and the Canadian Nursing Students' Association (CNSA) (2024) have previously passed resolutions calling for solutions from governments, including the need to compensate students for time spent in clinical placements.

Enough is enough. We need more than resolutions and words. We need to see support and respect for our nursing students.

To help raise the voice of nursing students, the CFNU partnered with the CNSA and Viewpoints Research to survey nursing students across Canada for the first time about finances, their nursing program experience and their expectations for a career in nursing.

The results from this groundbreaking research confirm what nursing students have long been telling us – financial worries place an undue burden on them, and they need better financial support from governments (CFNU & CNSA, 2024).

Building off the survey results, this report examines the key financial barriers impacting nursing students and it recommends policy options that the federal and provincial governments must take to better support them.

A long-standing issue that governments must address is that nursing students – unlike students in many other, often male-dominated, intern programs – receive no compensation for the time they spend getting hands-on experience in the clinical placements they must attend to graduate.

By their final year, nursing students are making important contributions to patient care during clinical placements. While students greatly benefit from the hands-on experience clinical placements provide, they participate at their own personal expense, having to pay course fees for the placements, as well as cover the costs of transportation and possibly accommodation related to the placement. Additionally, the hours required at clinic sites preclude many from securing paid employment outside of their studies.

For governments relying on nursing students to help solve the nursing shortage, the survey results should be a wake-up call. I was heartened to see in the survey results that despite the financial challenges confronting them, nursing students are resilient. Close to 90% of students surveyed said they were confident that they could complete their nursing program. Governments must embrace this resilience and support students so that they can succeed.

Their investment in students will pay off. The survey results revealed that three-quarters of nursing students plan to practice bedside nursing and the overwhelming majority (89%) want to work full time. A further 76% said they intend to work in their home province.

Nurses' unions are committed to working with the federal and provincial governments to eliminate the financial barriers standing in the way of nursing students. By investing in nursing students, governments are investing in Canada's health care system and its most important asset – its nursing workforce.

In solidarity,

Linda Silas
CFNU President

Recommendations

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

- 1 Introduce **grants to nursing students** in the form of annual grants or grants that correspond to preceptorship or program completion.
- 2 Improve the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness program for nurses working in underserved rural and remote communities by **expanding it to include nurses working in under-resourced urban settings.**
- 3 Introduce **income tax deductions** for expenses that nursing students incur while completing clinical **placements in rural or remote areas.**

PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS

- 1 Introduce **paid preceptorships** for final-year nursing students.
- 2 Increase the **availability of employment opportunities** for nursing students.
- 3 Improve financial support available to nursing students by providing **grants, bursaries, remote travel funding and free hospital parking.**
- 4 Ensure **access to mentorship programs** once employed.



Background

Canada's public health care system is in crisis. An aging population and patients with more complex care needs are straining a system already struggling with a severe nursing shortage. Difficult working conditions marked by heavy workloads, stress, burnout and disrespect and abuse are driving many nurses from the public health care system. Many others are reaching retirement age and retiring. While the nursing shortage began well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the additional pressures and stresses it brought to health care facilities have only made the situation worse.

Statistics Canada (2024) data shows that in the final quarter of 2024, there were 34,000 job vacancies for nurses nationwide. The situation is only expected to get worse. A 2024 CFNU member survey found that four in 10 practicing nurses plan to leave the profession or their job or retire within the next year (CFNU 2024). Forecasting models have predicted that the shortage of nurses in Canada could climb to 117,000 by 2030 (Calder et al., 2024).

To address the crisis, governments across Canada have undertaken efforts to recruit more nurses, including increasing the seat capacity of nursing schools. While this is a necessary and welcome step, simply boosting the number of available spots for students to enroll in nursing programs will not be enough. Nursing students must overcome significant financial obstacles to successfully complete their education and training. Unless governments make substantive changes to help ease the financial pressures, many nursing students will be forced to abandon nursing, deepening the crisis in our public health care system.

“

At times, it feels like I'm not being evaluated on my potential aptitude as a nurse, but instead on my ability to endure endless financial pressures amidst the intense workload of nursing school.

— Esayu Yacob



Financial barriers

Students in nursing programs face several financial barriers that can make it difficult for them to graduate and transition into a nursing career:

1 HIGH COSTS OF BECOMING A NURSE IN CANADA

The education and training to become a registered nurse in Canada is an incredibly costly endeavour. While the costs of tuition and fees for nursing school vary depending on the province and the institution, students can expect to pay, on average, about \$6,400 per year in tuition alone (Statistics Canada, 2024). This is comparatively high compared to other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (2024), where post-secondary education (including nursing) is either heavily subsidized or free.

In addition to schooling costs, transportation can be a major expense for students. Some students have no choice but to purchase, lease or borrow a personal vehicle (and absorb the related costs for gas, insurance, parking, etc.,) to attend the clinical placements necessary to complete their program. Public transportation is often not a realistic option for nursing students travelling to placements in rural or remote areas. Even for those in urban centres, public transit systems do not always run early enough in the morning or late enough at night to accommodate their clinic hours. Even if transit is possible, concerns around early-hour/late-night safety make it a less desirable choice. While taxis and ridesharing are an option, they also have cost and safety considerations.

Students must also cover the costs of a wide range of other expenses related to their nursing education and training, including obtaining Basic Life Support certification, completing mask fit testing, acquiring regular police background checks and purchasing supplies like lab kits or scrubs for clinical use. In some cases, students may even be liable for securing their own accommodations if they are assigned to a rural/remote community for clinical placements.

Upon graduation, new nursing school graduates are also faced with hundreds of dollars in costs to prepare and write licensing exams and apply for licensure with their provincial regulatory body.

2 LIMITED FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

While federal and provincial governments offer various grants, bursaries and loan forgiveness initiatives to assist nursing students, the patchwork of programs currently available is not enough to meet their financial needs given the high costs of tuition and related expenses for a nursing program. Students without their own financial means risk falling through the cracks.

Government financial support is especially important for those with lower incomes – including many mature students and those from traditionally marginalized groups – who lack the financial resources to fully cover their nursing education and training on their own. Many nursing school students are adults making career transitions or upgrading/bridging from a different health care role. Many are also mature students who are more likely to have dependants and less likely to be able to tap into family support than students entering directly from high school.

3 UNPAID CLINICAL PLACEMENTS

All nursing programs in Canada require nursing students to attend clinical placements to develop their nursing skills and gain hands-on experience in health care facilities. While the exact length of placements varies by institution, the first three years of nursing programs generally involve part-time placements that overlap with academic coursework. The final year features a roughly three-month-long, full-time preceptorship, where students transition into practicing more independently, including taking on a full patient assignment.

Despite the number of hours that nursing students spend attending clinical placements and the responsibilities they take on, they are not compensated for their care services. Instead, students are required to pay course fees to attend clinical placements. Additionally, the significant time demands that clinical placements and academic assignments place on nursing students make it difficult for them to secure paid employment elsewhere to supplement their income.

4 CHALLENGES BALANCING PAID EMPLOYMENT

Students who want to pursue paid employment while studying nursing face major barriers to doing so. Clinical placements often take up eight to 12 hours a day, multiple times a week, not including the time spent travelling to and from the location. In addition, students must find time to attend lectures and labs and complete required readings and assignments. Students must do all of this while also balancing the other necessities of life, leaving little time for a paid job. In fact, some nursing faculties advise students against working while in school due to the toll it can take on their physical and mental health, as well as on their academic performance (Lamswood et al., 2024).

Furthermore, many nursing schools deliver their programs in year-round or accelerated format, which offers students even fewer opportunities to pursue paid employment during the summer months compared to students in traditional four-year programs. These modified program formats are often geared towards mature applicants who enter nursing school with a completed bachelor's degree or significant career experience. While they fast-track students' nursing education, the programs can be challenging from a financial perspective. The students enrolled in them are often older students who are self-supporting and may have dependants to support and, therefore, would likely benefit from the earnings of summer employment.

For students without the financial resources, nursing school will be out of reach unless they take on loan debts or attempt a risky balancing act of paid employment on top of their unpaid clinical placements and coursework.

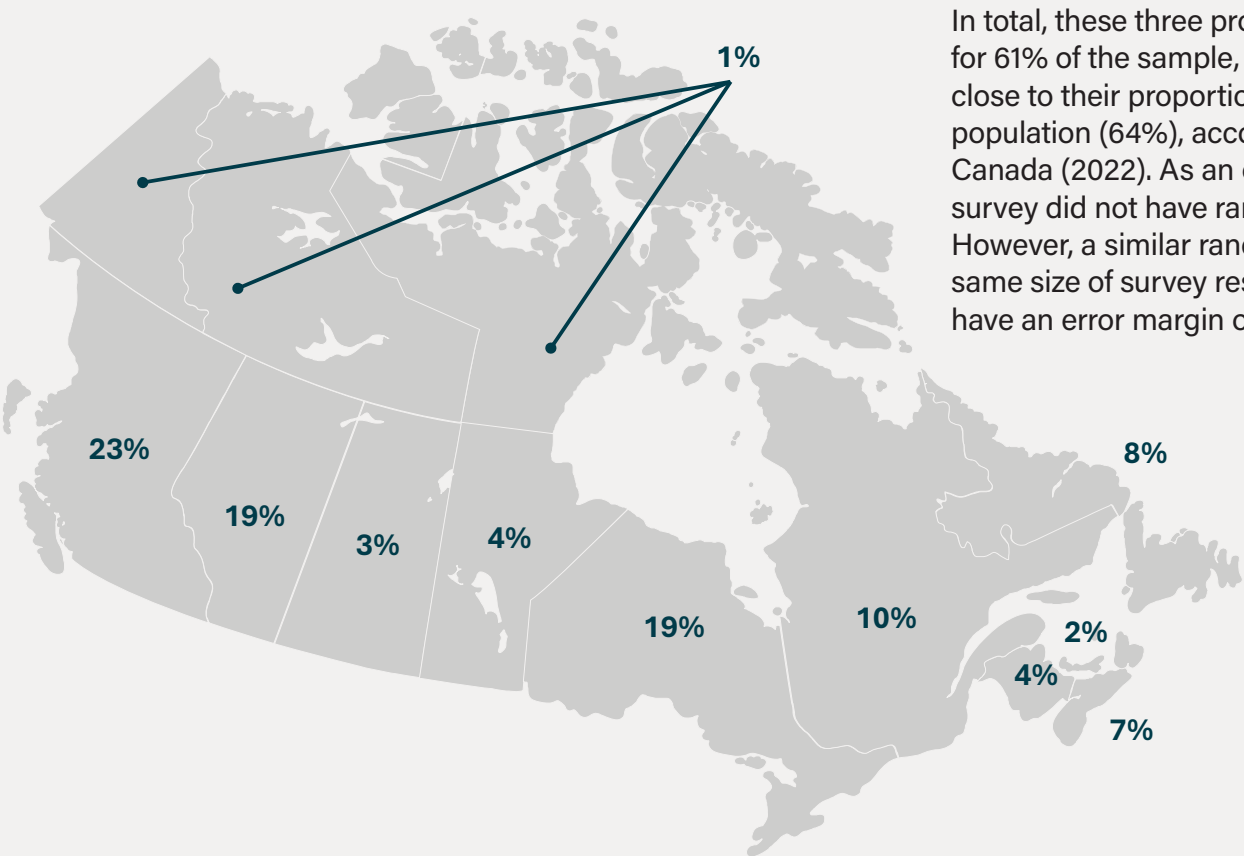
First national survey of nursing students reveals financial barriers

To better understand the challenges confronting nursing students and their expectations about a career in nursing, the CFNU and the CNSA conducted the first national survey of nursing students in Canada. The results demonstrate that while the overwhelming majority of students want to work in bedside nursing in their home province, financial concerns are impacting their mental health and, in some cases, their ability to complete their studies.

METHODOLOGY

The CFNU and the CNSA engaged Viewpoints Research to survey students in nursing programs throughout Canada on student finances, nursing program experiences and expectations and their expectations for work after graduating.

The survey was conducted online in October and November 2024. The survey was open to nursing students across Canada enrolled in registered, practical and psychiatric nursing programs. CNSA used extensive social media outreach and emails from its representatives and deans at post-secondary nursing faculties to encourage nursing students to participate in the survey. In all, 3,571 students across Canada completed it, with the majority of responses coming from British Columbia (23%), Alberta (19%) and Ontario (19%).

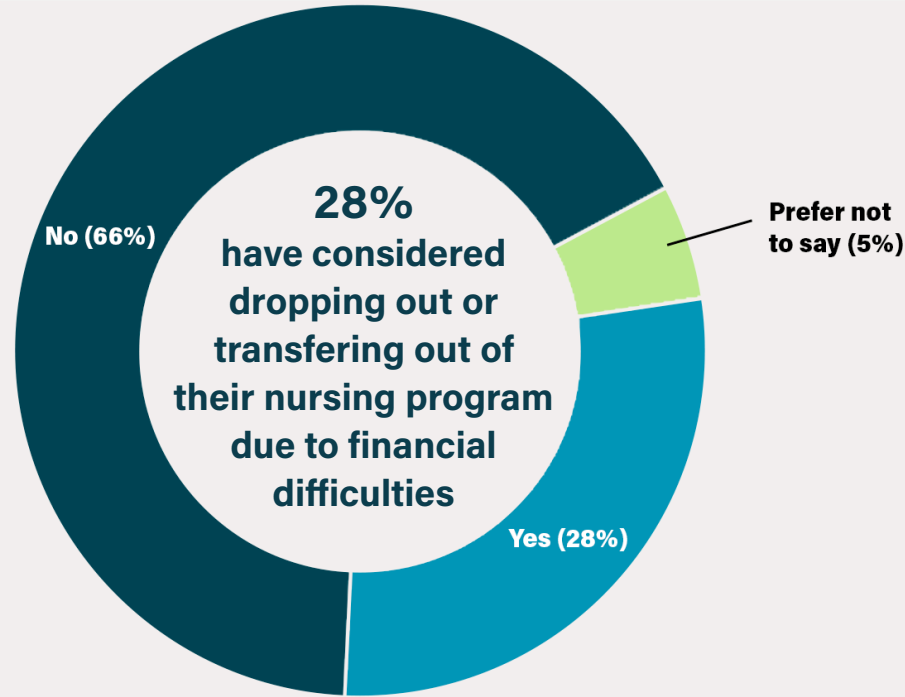


In total, these three provinces accounted for 61% of the sample, which is relatively close to their proportion of Canada's population (64%), according to Statistics Canada (2022). As an online survey, the survey did not have random sampling. However, a similar random sample of the same size of survey respondents would have an error margin of +/- 1.66%.

FINDINGS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Most responders were enrolled in four-year nursing programs and there was an even distribution across first, middle (second and third) and final years of study (29%, 37% and 34%, respectively). Eighty-nine per cent of students were training to be an RN or clinical nurse specialist. Sixty-three per cent of students in the sample were 24 years of age or younger and 90% identified as women. Sixty-seven per cent of students in the sample said white or Caucasian best described their ethnicity, followed by Black or African (8%), South Asian (7%) and Southeast Asian (7%) as the next largest categories.



STUDENT FINANCES

The survey results demonstrate just how significant financial challenges are for nursing students in Canada, with 82% of survey respondents saying they were concerned about their finances (CFNU & CNSA, 2024). More than one-quarter (28%) said they had considered dropping out of their nursing studies because of financial difficulties. This sentiment was especially prevalent among students who worked full time while going to school, with 47% of them saying they had contemplated transferring out of their program.

Concern about finances is also adversely affecting students' studies and their wellbeing. Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents said financial difficulties had a negative impact on their academics and 72% said those difficulties were harming their physical or mental health.

Worries about finances were most pronounced among older students, with 42% of those aged 30 years and older saying they were greatly concerned compared with 37% of 25- to 29-year-olds and 21% of nursing students under 24.

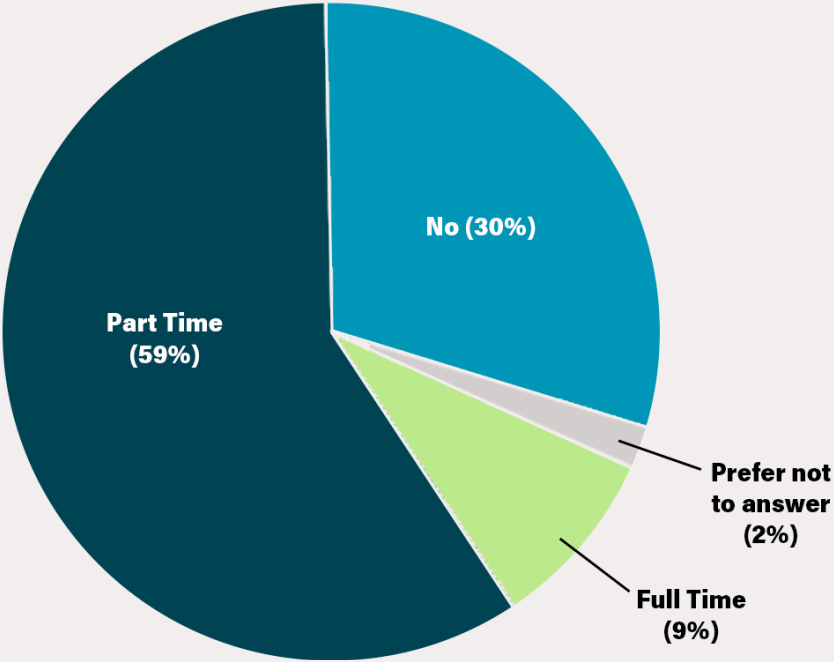


“Concern about finances is also adversely affecting students' studies and their wellbeing. Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents said financial difficulties had a negative impact on their academics and 72% said those difficulties were harming their physical or mental health.”

Nursing students primarily use scholarships, grants or bursaries (60%), student loans (58%) and personal savings (54%) to finance their education. This is particularly true for final-year students, where almost two-thirds of survey respondents said they used scholarships, grants, bursaries or loans to finance their education. Loans were also particularly common for older students (81% of those aged 25 to 29 said they used them, as did 73% of nursing students aged 30 or older).

Other sources of financial support include family support (43%) – particularly common among younger nursing students – and employment income (38%). Final-year students and older students were the most likely to have jobs. Of the students who were employed, 59% worked part time, with the figure jumping to 67% for students in their final year of school. While full-time employment was not as common, 9% of students said they worked full time.

Most nursing students are working part-time to support themselves during their studies



When asked about current government financial supports, 60% of respondents said they were not sufficient to meet their needs. Students more likely to feel this way were those who were older (67% of 25- to 29-year-olds and 71% of those aged 30 and up), closer to finishing their studies (67% of final-year students) or working full time (76%).

Geographically, students living in Manitoba (67%), New Brunswick (70%), Newfoundland and Labrador (72%) and Nova Scotia (66%) were more likely to think that current financial measures were insufficient.

When asked which financial support initiatives they would like to see implemented, paid clinical placements came out on top, with 92% of respondents supporting the idea. Other popular initiatives included providing allowances or subsidies to help students offset costs incurred in attending clinical placements (83%), increasing the amount of grants, scholarships and bursaries available to nursing students (78%), eliminating interest on provincial student loans (55%) and expanding student loan forgiveness for nurses who work in rural or remote communities (52%).

Nursing students felt so strongly about the need for improved government support that many said their vote in an election could be swayed by the policies of political parties on this issue. In particular, 87% said they would be more likely to vote for a political party committed to paying nursing students for clinical placements. Seventy-three per cent said they would vote for a party that supported providing allowances or subsidies to nursing students to help offset clinical placement costs.

Students also said their vote would go to political parties that favoured increasing the amount of grants, scholarships and bursaries available to nursing students (64%), eliminating interest on provincial student loans (49%) and expanding student loan forgiveness for nurses who work in rural or remote communities (44%).

NURSING PROGRAM EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

Nursing education programs challenge students like few others. The demanding curriculum, arduous placements and the obstacles they encounter in completing their education put nursing students under significant stress. Nearly all – 93% – of the students surveyed reported moderate or high stress during their program.

The top two sources of stress were academic performance (81%) and financial stressors (66%). Other sources of stress included personal responsibilities (64%), mental health challenges (54%), clinical performance (51%), physical health issues (24%) and bullying, harassment or discrimination in clinical or classroom settings (11%).

Despite the challenges, the survey showed that most students (64%) are satisfied with the nursing education they are receiving and 88% of them are confident in their ability to complete their nursing program.

INTEREST IN MENTORSHIP

Formal mentorship programs are desired among a large majority of final-year nursing students surveyed, with 84% saying they were interested or very interested in having a mentor to assist with their transition from their final practicum to working in the profession. Of those who were interested in having a mentor to provide peer support to them during this period, 86% said they would like a mentor to help build their confidence in applying skills and 85% said they would like mentor support around navigating a new career.

Mentorship programs are widely considered to be an effective retention strategy for nurses across the career span. The Nursing Retention Toolkit, published by Health Canada (2024) in March 2024, recommends mentorship be provided outside the clinical setting by mentors as a dedicated paid position, be voluntary rather than mandatory and have flexibility regarding the duration based on the needs of the mentee.



EXPECTATIONS FOR WORK

For provincial and territorial governments hoping to recruit newly graduated nurses, the survey results offer good news: nursing students overwhelmingly want to find full-time work in their home province, with many planning to practice at the bedside.

Almost 90% of survey respondents said they were interested in pursuing full-time work once they graduated and 76% said they intended to work in their home province after graduation.

Three-quarters of nursing students surveyed said they intended to work in bedside nursing, with 47% fully planning to practice nursing at the bedside and 28% likely to do so. This was particularly true for students in Quebec (60%), registered practical nurses (71%) and older nursing students (52% of those 30 years and up).

Survey results revealed that 9% of respondents were unlikely or did not intend to work in bedside nursing after graduation. A further 15% were undecided. When asked what factors might affect their decision not to pursue bedside nursing, respondents focused on:

- concerns around high workloads (77%)
- concerns around burnout and the ability to maintain work-life balance (73%)
- plans to pursue further education (41%)
- concerns around workplace culture (e.g., experiencing bullying or harassment) (40%)

Apprehension around these issues becomes more pronounced as nursing students get closer to graduation, with final-year students saying they were concerned about:

- workload (87%)
- burnout (82%)
- workplace culture (51%)



Addressing students' concerns

It is evident from the survey results that although the majority of nursing students want to work in bedside nursing in their home province, financial insecurities pose a barrier for many of them. Addressing these concerns must be a priority for federal and provincial governments for several reasons.

ENSURING THE RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT OF NURSING STUDENTS

At a time when the country is suffering from a severe shortage of nurses, governments cannot afford to lose nursing students before they have even started their nursing careers. While the survey results show that the majority of nursing students surveyed are satisfied with their education, there is no doubt that financial concerns are having a negative impact on them.

Over 80% of survey respondents identified financial difficulties as a concern and more than one-quarter said they were considering leaving their nursing program because of financial difficulties. The survey results also underscore the extent to which financial difficulties are taking a physical and mental health toll on nursing students.

With high tuition costs on top of the high costs of living in Canada, a nursing education can be unaffordable for those with lower incomes. This can include mature students with dependants – such as single mothers – and those from marginalized groups who might be less affluent. While some nursing students may seek paid employment to supplement their income, for many this is not an option because of the rigorous and time-consuming nature of their academic studies and clinical placements.

Offering more comprehensive financial support for nursing students would make nursing programs more accessible to a wider, more diverse group of people – one more reflective of Canada’s population. It would also help to retain current nursing students by easing their financial worries and the negative impact those worries have on their wellbeing.

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ACKNOWLEDGING PRECEDENT FOR PAID PLACEMENTS

The survey results highlight nursing students’ key priorities in relation to government financial support. Over 90% of respondents supported paying nursing students for the time they spend in clinical placements and 83% wanted governments to provide allowances or subsidies to help offset costs they incur in attending clinical placements. While paid clinical placements for nursing students are uncommon in Canada, students in many different types of disciplines – especially male-dominated programs – do receive compensation for the work they do during intern placements. This includes students in engineering, business, law, medicine, the trades and law enforcement. The contributions that nursing students make while attending clinical placements are just as valuable, if not more so, than other student interns, calling into question why their placements remain unpaid.

Internationally, there is a strong precedent for financially supporting nursing students through initiatives such as free tuition, paid clinical placements and expense allowances. Countries offering supports include:

AUSTRALIA

Two of the country’s state governments offer free tuition for nursing education programs (Victoria State Government, 2025; Queensland Government, 2024). Beginning in July 2025, the Australian government will provide a means-tested grant for students completing clinical placements (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024).

GERMANY

Training for vocational nursing is free of charge and nursing students are paid during their training, with the amount based on their year of study (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2025)

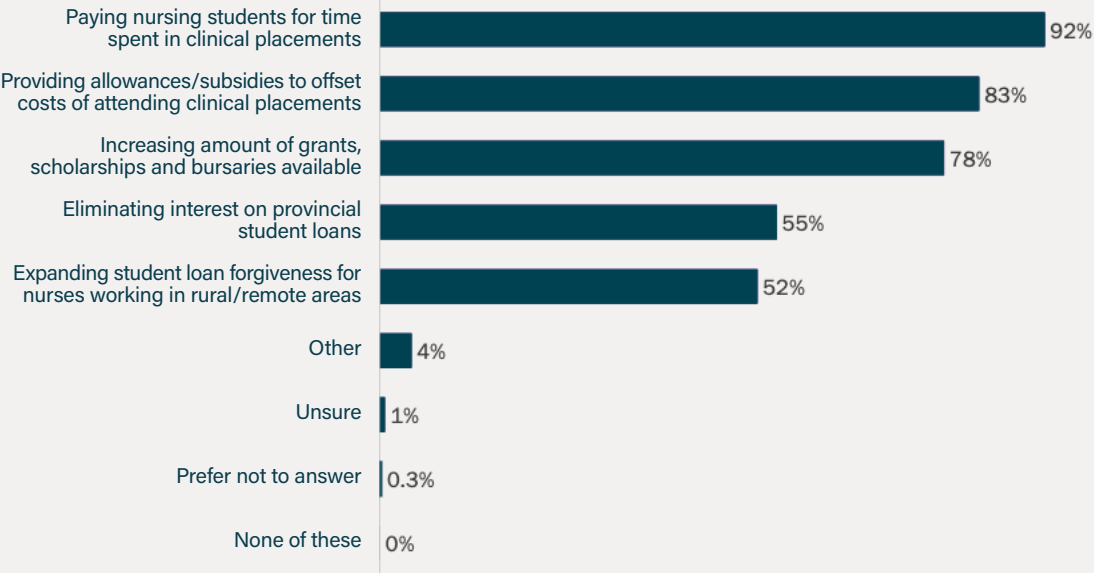
IRELAND

Students completing their final-year internship are paid at a rate of 80% of a first-year nurse’s salary (Government of Ireland, 2022). In the first three years of a nursing degree, students receive an annual subsistence allowance to cover meal costs incurred during their placements (Government of Ireland, 2022). There is also an accommodation allowance for students who attend placements away from home and a program that allows students to claim travel expenses incurred while attending placements (Government of Ireland, 2022).

UNITED KINGDOM

All nursing students receive an annual, non-means-tested training grant, with students in certain specialties eligible to receive an extra amount (NHS Business Services Authority, n.d.). Travel and accommodation costs are reimbursed up to specified limits for placements (NHS Business Services Authority, n.d.). There are also grants available for nursing students with dependent children and for those experiencing unforeseen financial hardship (NHS Business Services Authority, n.d.).

Almost all nursing students support pay for time in clinical placements



REWARDING AND VALUING STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND SACRIFICES

Clinical placements provide an environment where students can develop and refine their skills in a real-world setting. While nursing students may make limited contributions during placements in the early years of their program, this fundamentally changes by their upper years. In their final year, nursing students are operating quite independently, including often taking on full patient assignments.

While there might be concern that paying students for clinical placements could result in them being viewed as staff rather than students on the unit and compromise their educational experience, the reality is that as long as the students are classified as supernumerary, payment for time worked would not change their treatment or learning experience.

A study on nursing students in Alberta who completed their preceptorships working as paid employees during the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic found that 89.7% of students agreed that staff on their unit were supportive of their learning and had an overall positive experience (Shajani et al., 2023).

A nursing education often requires students to forgo income for large stretches of their program and incur significant costs. In addition to the time and financial constraints their education places on them, nursing students must also contend with physical and mental health challenges arising from attending clinical placements, including an increased risk of contracting communicable diseases, suffering a workplace injury and experiencing bullying and harassment. While non-student workers have some say on when they come onto the job and earn bonuses if they work on nights or weekends, nursing students are expected to be on a hospital unit any day of the week and following a schedule set by their instructor or preceptor without any compensation.

Compensating nursing students for the time they spend in clinical placements would not only ease their financial concerns, but it would also recognize and reward their contributions to the health care system and their personal sacrifices.



Policy options

From a policy perspective, there are several initiatives that federal and provincial governments could undertake to reduce or eliminate the financial barriers impacting nursing students. The rationale for this section is to provide a point of reference for serious engagement and discussion on these important issues with these levels of government. Any of these potential policy initiatives – based off best practices in jurisdictions at home and abroad – would be impactful for nursing students and help to address retention and recruitment issues in Canada’s nursing workforce.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

INTRODUCE GRANTS FOR NURSING STUDENTS

The federal government has previously offered up to \$4,000 in grants for apprentices completing their apprenticeship training (Government of Canada, n.d.). This was in addition to apprentices being able to claim Employment Insurance while attending courses (Government of Canada, n.d.) and deduct the cost of tool purchases on federal income taxes (Government of Canada, n.d.). Similar assistance could be offered to nursing students through Employment and Social Development Canada.

Federal grants could take the form of a one-time payment at the start of nursing studies or an annual amount for each year of a nursing program (e.g., providing a \$1,000 grant each year across a four-year nursing program).

The grant could align with the start of preceptorship to help students offset lost income and expenses incurred during the full-time, unpaid training. Alternatively, it could be a completion grant to help offset expenses students face upon graduating, such as booking the licensure exam, purchasing exam preparation materials and applying for licensure with the applicable provincial/territorial licensing body.

Unlike a one-time payment, annual grants could provide students with consistent funding for each year of their program. However, one possible challenge with annual grants is that they could place students who are enrolled in shorter after-degree or accelerated programs at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing funding. The federal government would have to take this into account when introducing grants for nursing students.

Introducing grants for nursing students would put Canada on par with other countries, including the United Kingdom, that already offer them.

IMPROVE CANADA STUDENT LOAN FORGIVENESS

The federal government currently offers \$30,000 in loan forgiveness for nursing students who work in underserved rural and remote communities through the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness program (Government of Canada, 2024). The loan forgiveness is distributed over five years (\$4,000 in year one, \$5,000 in year two, \$6,000 in year three, \$7,000 in year four and \$8,000 in year five). Reforming the program to provide nursing students with more financial relief is another initiative that the federal government could adopt. Reform could happen by increasing the amount of loan forgiveness offered to nurses.

In 2023, the federal government increased the amount of loan forgiveness for nurses who work in underserved rural and remote communities from \$20,000 over five years to \$30,000 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2025). While this was a welcome increase, the amount provided is still not enough to cover the high costs of a nursing education and remains significantly lower than that offered to medical students who work in underserved rural and remote communities (\$60,000) (Government of Canada, 2024). While medical students pay higher tuition fees than nursing students, the costs for nursing programs are also significant. Tuition alone typically costs about \$6,404 per year, with added expenses for books, equipment and transportation that nursing students pay for out of pocket (Statistics Canada, 2024). To make a meaningful difference to nursing students, the federal government could further increase the amount of loan forgiveness.

Another way in which the federal government could improve the program is to expand eligibility for student loan forgiveness to nurses working in under-resourced urban settings. There is an urgent need to fill the large number of vacancies in under-resourced urban facilities across the country, in addition to underserved rural and remote communities. To maintain the current incentive provided to nurses to fill positions in underserved rural and remote communities through the existing student loan forgiveness program, the amount of loan forgiveness provided to those nurses could be increased relative to the amount that would be available to nurses working in under-resourced urban settings.

OFFER INCOME TAX DEDUCTIONS TO NURSING STUDENTS IN RURAL PLACEMENTS

Nursing students often complete clinical placements in rural communities, with some travelling hundreds of kilometres away from their residence. Yet, at the present time, there are only limited funding allowances that provinces/health care authorities allocate for students completing rural clinical placements. In contrast, apprentices in construction receive federal income tax deductions for the costs associated with completing training in areas over 150km away from their residence under a Labour Mobility Deduction for Tradespeople program (Canada Revenue Agency, 2024).

Similar tax deductions could be introduced for nursing students attending rural clinical placements. Allowing nursing students to claim a tax deduction for expenses they incur while attending rural clinical placements (e.g., transportation and accommodation expenses) could help improve access to rural training opportunities, potentially attracting more nursing students to work in rural communities after they complete their studies. This is something that other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland, already do.

PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS

a **INTRODUCE PAID PRECEPTORSHIPS FOR NURSING STUDENTS**

Most provinces offer third- and fourth-year nursing students the opportunity to work as unregulated care providers, with job titles varying across jurisdictions (e.g., Employed Student Nurse in B.C., Undergraduate Nurse Employee in Alberta and Manitoba, Nurse Extern in Ontario and Quebec, Undergraduate Student Nurse in Nova Scotia, Nursing Student Summer Employment Program in P.E.I. and Nurse Collegian in Newfoundland and Labrador). While their responsibilities vary depending on the jurisdiction, the students deliver nursing care under a registered nurse’s supervision and their work generally exceeds the scope of health care aides (HCAs) and personal support workers (PSWs).

Given that most provinces already have existing structures to offer hourly pay to students for nursing care delivered outside of their unpaid clinical placements, it would not be difficult to expand the compensation paradigm to include hours students dedicate to their preceptorship in their final year of nursing studies.

There are precedents for this in Canada. From January 2022 to April 2022, Alberta Health Services employed over 600 Alberta nursing students as Hybrid UNEs during their preceptorship (Short, 2022). An academic article reviewing the initiative called it “successful and innovative,” noting that:

The collaboration between the health system and PSIs (postsecondary institutions) was an innovative way to address the nursing shortage, stabilize the workforce, and allow senior nursing students the opportunity to both finish their undergraduate education and contribute to the COVID-19 pandemic response. Student feedback via mid- and endpoint surveys confirmed that their development, knowledge, autonomy, and confidence were fostered and supported, and led to a successful transition into the nursing profession (Shajani et al., 2023).

Alberta also currently offers a Hybrid UNE program that gives students doing their preceptorship in rural areas the opportunity to be employed as UNEs (Koch and Froese, 2023).

Other provinces could introduce similar programs.

b **IMPROVE NURSING STUDENTS' EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

As previously noted, the majority of Canada’s provinces allow upper-years nursing students to work as unregulated health care providers. Paid employment as an unregulated care provider allows nursing students to gain additional clinical experience, making the transition to practice after graduation smoother. It also provides an opportunity for nursing students to earn income to help pay for their nursing studies.

Provincial governments that already offer nursing student employment programs could invest in increasing the number of opportunities available so that all students who are interested in participating in the programs have the opportunity to do so.

Provinces that do not have nursing student employment programs (e.g., New Brunswick and Saskatchewan) could implement them, ensuring that students practice under registered nurse supervision and that they can deliver nursing care appropriate to their level of education (i.e., exceeding the scope of HCAs/PSWs).

c **IMPROVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

I) INTRODUCE UNIVERSAL GRANTS

Nursing students would benefit from provincial financial support in the form of yearly grants to help offset the high costs of a nursing education. Some jurisdictions already do this, with British Columbia providing \$2,000 annually to all nursing students and an additional 5,000 annually to Indigenous nursing students as a tuition credit (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Students in other jurisdictions would benefit from similar initiatives.

III) INTRODUCE ALLOWANCES FOR NURSING STUDENTS IN RURAL PLACEMENTS

Provincial funding in the form of allowances for nursing students wishing or required to complete placements in rural communities would ease the financial pressures on students who must travel away from their home community to attend the placement. The allowances could include allowing students to claim expenses for transportation, accommodation or meals while training in rural areas.

The additional financial support could also potentially expose more nursing students to rural placements, increasing the chances that they will seek employment in those communities after graduation.

II) INTRODUCE NEEDS-BASED BURSARIES

Targeted funding for low-income nursing students would help ensure more diversity in nursing programs and, ultimately, the nursing profession. British Columbia (\$2,000) offers an annual, means-tested bursary to low-income nursing students (Student Aid BC, n.d.) and Alberta offers a one-time bursary (\$5,000) to up to 1,700 low-income nursing students (Student Aid Alberta, n.d.). Other jurisdictions could follow suit, especially if they are not willing to introduce universal grants for all nursing students.

IV) INTRODUCE FREE HOSPITAL PARKING

Students are required to pay regular rates for hospital parking, multiple days a week, to attend their unpaid clinical placements, which can cost them hundreds of dollars a year in addition to vehicle expenses. Although less expensive, public transit is often not an option for students as service hours do not necessarily coincide with the time of day that they begin or end their placements. Free parking could alleviate some of the financial pressures on student nurses.

Recommendations

Based on the national student survey results and the policy options that are available to federal and provincial governments, the CFNU has outlined the following recommendations that each level of government can implement to support nursing students in Canada. This report has provided a rationale for each, along with examples of jurisdictions where most of these initiatives have already been successfully implemented.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

- 1. Introduce **grants to nursing students** in the form of annual grants or grants that correspond to preceptorship or program completion.
- 2. Improve the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness program for nurses working in underserved rural and remote communities by **expanding it to include nurses working in under-resourced urban settings**.
- 3. Introduce **income tax deductions** for expenses that nursing students incur while completing clinical **placements in rural or remote areas**.

PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS

- 1. Introduce **paid preceptorships** for final-year nursing students.
- 2. Increase the **availability of employment opportunities** for nursing students.
- 3. Improve financial support available to nursing students by providing **grants, bursaries, remote travel funding and free hospital parking**.
- 4. Ensure **access to mentorship programs** once employed.




Conclusion

Nursing students face considerable financial challenges as they work to complete their nursing education. The high costs of tuition and related expenses leave many worried about how they will manage their budget. The current patchwork of grants, bursaries and loan forgiveness programs are insufficient, especially for financially disadvantaged students. Yet, paid employment outside of their studies is not an option for many students due to the academic rigours of the program and the time-consuming and inflexible nature of the clinical placements they must attend in order to graduate. Worries about finances put nursing students under significant stress, negatively impacting their mental health and forcing some students to consider dropping their studies.

Canada’s public health care system cannot afford to lose nursing students. Their knowledge and skills are invaluable to a system already struggling with a severe nursing shortage. It is incumbent upon the federal and provincial governments to invest in nursing students to ease the financial burden that they carry and help address the country’s nursing workforce crisis.

Investments should not only include enhanced or new grants, bursaries and loan forgiveness programs, they should also embrace innovative initiatives such as tax deductions for expenses related to clinical placements and, most importantly, paid preceptorships for final-year nursing students. By compensating students for the hours they spend in their final year clinical placements, governments can send a strong signal to nursing students that they are a valuable asset to the public health care system.



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*Enough is enough.
We need more than
resolutions and words.
We need to see support
and respect for our
nursing students.*

— Linda Silas,
CFNU President



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