



CHILDREN'S  
AID FOUNDATION  
OF CANADA

2025/2026

# POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION REPORT



# Executive Summary

Children's Aid Foundation of Canada's 2025-26 Post-Secondary Education program continued to focus on a simple but urgent goal: helping more young people from care get into, stay in, and graduate from post-secondary education. For many young people who have been involved with the child welfare system, school has not always been steady or easy. Moves, housing instability, limited income, and gaps in support can make it difficult to finish high school, plan for post-secondary education, and keep going once they get there.

This work has grown to become one of the pillars of CAFC's broader five-year strategy, introduced in 2025-26, across Education, Employment, Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Strong Families and Lifelong Connections. The PSE programme is housed under education, and connects to each of these 4 areas by helping young people build confidence, stability, relationships, and future opportunities. To get there, they need more than tuition support; they need people, tools, and flexible supports that meet them where they are.

A key part of this work is the introduction of the Smart Start program, a new venture that helps young people prepare for post-secondary education before they arrive on campus and stay supported during the early stages of their studies. Smart Start is designed to meet young people earlier, at the transition from high school to post-secondary education, when planning, confidence, financial readiness, and the right supports can make a major difference. The program brings together practical guidance, coaching, mentorship, academic support, navigation help, and wraparound services so that young people are not left to figure out the next step on their own.

Smart Start points to the future of CAFC's post-secondary education work. Alongside CAFC's long-standing national PSE Program and other partner-led initiatives, it has helped demonstrate the value of more proactive, relationship-based, and responsive supports for young people. By strengthening partnerships with community and child welfare organizations, CAFC is building a more connected and flexible approach that helps students navigate challenges, access opportunities, and succeed in their post-secondary journeys

**The Children's Aid Foundation of Canada extends our heartfelt thanks to every donor and supporter whose belief in young people and investment in our work continues to open doors, creates opportunities, and empowers students and graduates to achieve their educational, career, and life goals.**

# The Post Secondary Education Program

The Post Secondary Education program is made up of the following components:

**Scholarships** provide young people with financial support and access to learning opportunities that reflect their interests, abilities, and goals. Scholarship recipients receive \$5,000 for each academic year they are in school until they complete their program.

**Bursaries** of up to \$2,000 have provided additional education support for eligible full- and part-time post-secondary students who applied for, but did not receive, a scholarship. Bursaries began to be phased out in 2025–26 as an independent program, and have been formally incorporated under the CAFC Scholarship as another path for the 2026-27 school year for part-time students and students enrolled in full-time courses less than one year.

**Smart Start** is a three-year venture focused on improving post-secondary retention for youth transitioning from child welfare in the Toronto area. Guided by over a decade of CAFC Scholarship outcomes and student feedback, the program provides targeted supports that strengthen financial stability, academic success, and social-emotional wellbeing during the critical first two years of study.

The **Education Support Fund**, formally the Youth Opportunity Fund, wound up in 2024–25 with remaining payments finalized in the 2025–26 fiscal year. Providing grants to scholarship recipients and graduates to address immediate needs in support of their academic or career-related goals, the Youth Opportunity Fund informed the development of an expanded Education Support Fund, currently being trialed through the Smart Start program, with the goal of scaling the support to all CAFC post-secondary students in the 2026-27 school year.

**Graduation Awards** of up to \$2,000 recognize prior scholarship and bursary recipients who complete their post-secondary programs. The awards celebrate students' achievements while also serving as an important point of contact during the transition from education to employment, helping CAFC better understand and support their next steps.

Beyond the PSE program, CAFC also provides grants to, and invests in ventures with, partner agencies across Canada to support young people at all stages of their education journey.

# Impact To Date

Since the awarding of \$15,000 to nine students from the Toronto area in 1995, over the following 30+ years CAFC’s post-secondary programs have continued to grow and expand in scope. We have invested **\$28,713,408**, supporting **9,300** student participations across multiple years. Because most students received support in more than one year, this equates to just over **2,500** unique individuals supported overall.

## Granting Overview: 2025-26

**542** unique students were supported in the 2025-2026 academic year, with **\$2,229,992** in awards.

|                                                                 | 2025-26     |            | 2024-25     |            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Grant Type                                                      | Grant Type  | Grant Type | Grant Type  | Grant Type |
| Scholarships                                                    | \$1,770,365 | 372        | \$1,475,000 | 318        |
| Smart Start Venture Scholarships & Education Support Fund       | \$216,752   | 37         | -           | -          |
| Bursaries for full- or part-time studies                        | \$47,000    | 26         | \$140,000   | 87         |
| Scholarships or bursaries granted through OTSS endowments*      | \$38,500    | 17         | \$51,500    | 17         |
| Youth who received grants from the HSBC Youth Opportunity Fund* | \$6,315     | 13         | \$242,572   | 154        |
| Graduation Awards                                               | \$149,560   | 106        | \$138,200   | 111        |
| Corsage Project Community Awards**                              | \$1,500     | 3          | \$1,500     | 3          |
| TOTAL GRANTED                                                   | \$2,229,992 | 575        | \$2,048,772 | 690        |

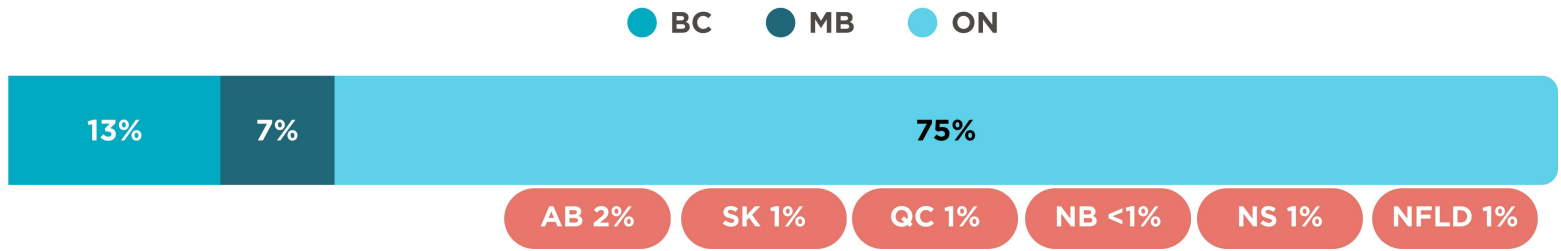
**Ontario Trust for Student Support (OTSS) Endowed Funds**  
CAFC endowments at George Brown College, Centennial College, Humber College, and the University of Waterloo and matched by the Ontario government through the Ontario Trust for Student Support program in 2011. Students are matched with CAFC scholarships through the annual review process.

**Corsage Project Community Awards**  
The CAFC administers funding for the Corsage Project, including scholarships and Community Award payments across the Greater Toronto Area.

# Our Reach

Of the **542** students supported across all the programs in 2025-26, the breakdown below highlights their location and demographic information.

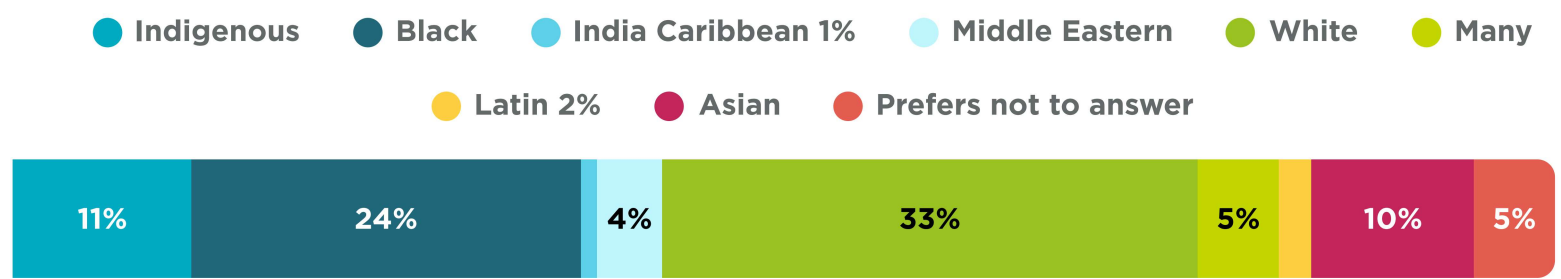
## Location



## Gender



## Ethnicity



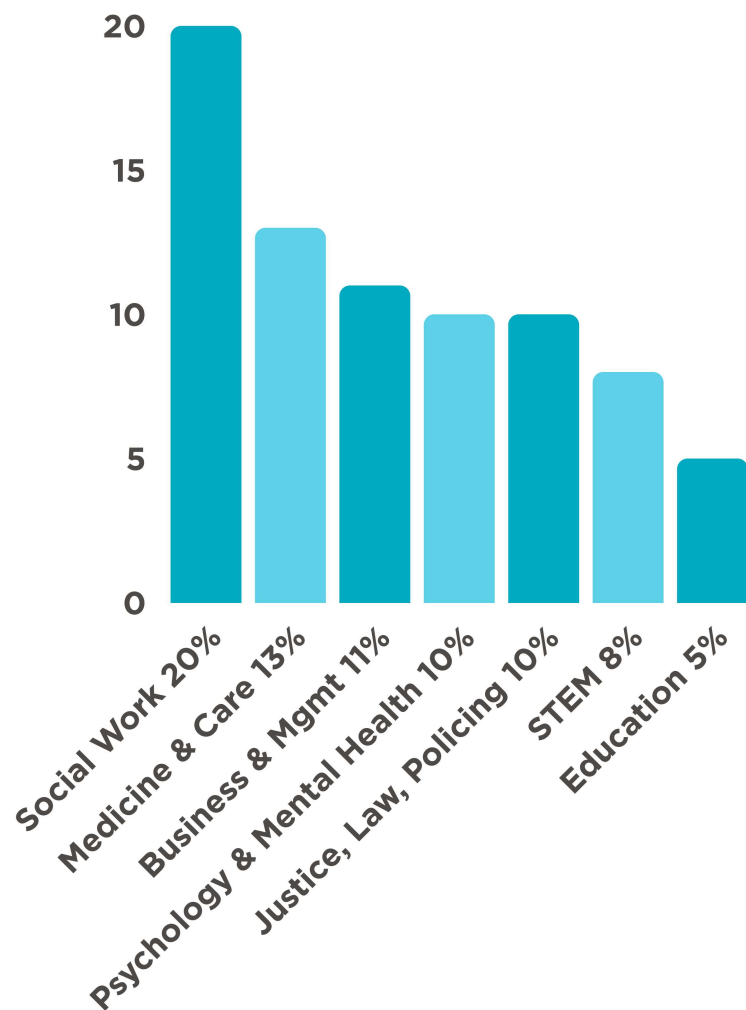
# Schools and Programs

Students receiving scholarships and bursaries attended **117** different schools across Canada.



# Our Reach

## Programs of Study



The most pursued degrees continue to be in social work, nursing, business, psychology and counselling, the law, STEM and teaching

However, CAFC's 2025-26 students pursued an impressive range of educational interests and career aspirations.

Art Music and Design 4%  
Media, Film and Communications 4%  
Political Science 4%  
Humanities 3%  
Transition year 2%  
Trades 2%  
Environmental studies 1%  
Animal Care 1%  
Aviation and Automotive 1%  
Indigenous Studies <1%  
Religion <1%  
Co-Operative Education <1%

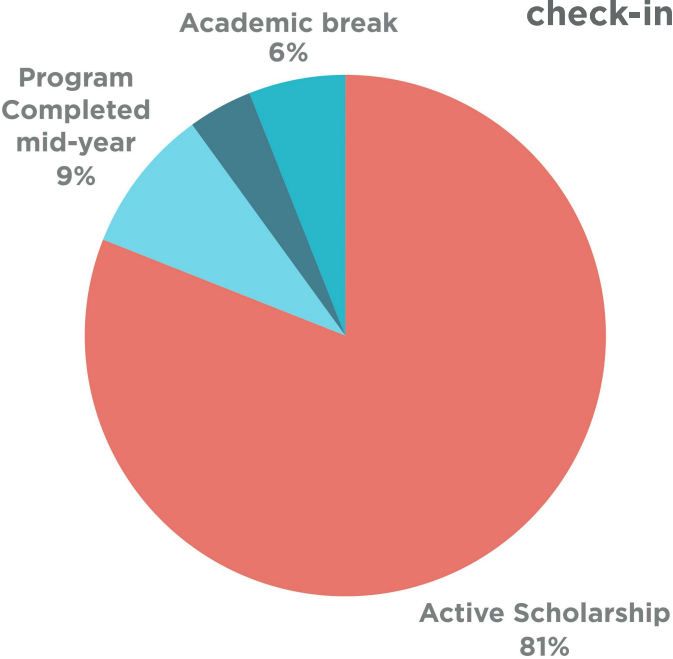
## CAFC Scholarship - Impact

The CAFC Scholarship provides flexible, long-term financial support that follows students throughout their educational journey. Recipients receive \$5,000 annually over two semesters for each year of their program until it is complete without having to reapply for funding. Students complete a brief online check-in each semester to share updates on their academic progress, breaks, or future plans.

Unlike traditional scholarship programs, the CAFC Scholarship allows students to pause their studies without losing their funding. Scholarships can be held during periods away from school, provided students remain connected through the online check-ins. This approach reduces stress, removes barriers to PSE studies, and fosters ongoing relationships with students, resulting in strong engagement, low non-compliance rates, and greater support for success for each student's unique path to graduation.

# CAFC Scholarship Impact

In 2025-26 there was a **96%** student response rate to check-ins.



90% of students on an active scholarship intend to continue school in the Fall

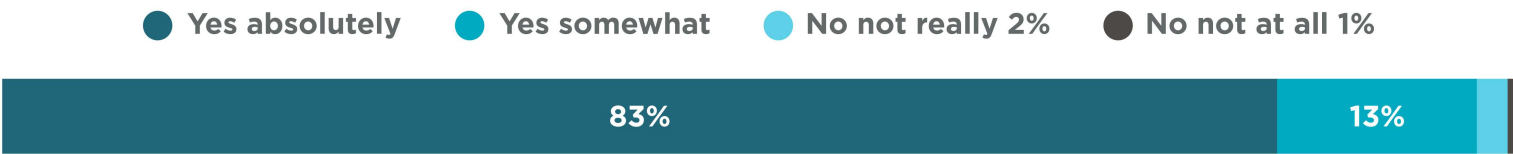
72% of students whose award is on hold at the end of 2025-26 intend to return to school in the Fall

Those students who completed their programs mid year will be eligible to apply for a 2026 Graduation Award

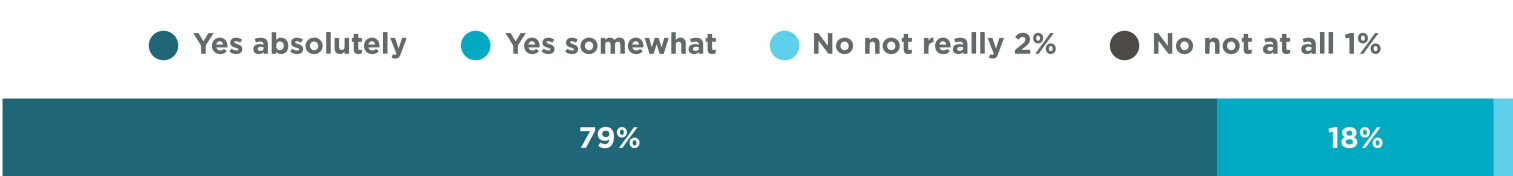
Of the 4% non-respondents, most had previously indicated a plan to take the academic year off, and are expected to reconnect at the next check-in

Students have the opportunity in the check-In to evaluate the CAFC Scholarship’s impact in four key areas. 1% of students chose not to answer, or provided feedback in another way.

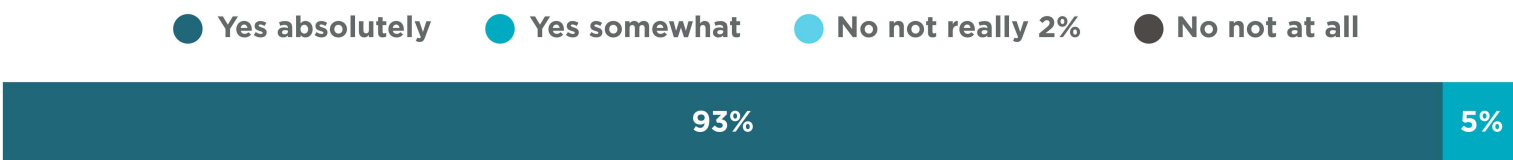
## Has receiving CAFC support influenced your decision to start or continue school?



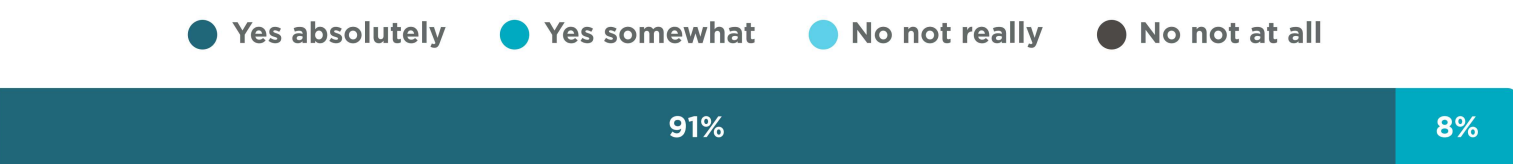
## Has receiving CAFC support helped to increase your confidence?



## Has receiving CAFC support helped to decrease stress?



## Has receiving CAFC support helped you plan for the future?



# Smart Start - Year One

Smart Start is a three-year venture launched in 2025–26 to improve student retention during the first two years of PSE for youth transitioning from child welfare in the Toronto area. Informed by more than a decade of CAFC Scholarship data and student feedback, the program addresses three critical barriers: financial stability, academic support, and social-emotional wellbeing. This year, a cohort of 35 students were engaged in the program. An additional cohort of 45 first year students will be added in the 2026-27 school year.

In addition to receiving a CAFC Scholarship, participants benefit from individualized coaching from a dedicated **PSE Coach**, peer support from **Living Expert Peer Mentors**, and up to \$2,000 annually in **Education Support Funds**.

- **35 Students supported in the first cohort**
- **14 Post-Secondary Institutions Represented**
- **7 Institutional Partnerships Established**
- **290 One-to-One Coaching Interactions**

Smart Start Cohort 1 achieved a **100%** retention rate in 2025–26.

- **9 Level Up Group Events, where students connect, share experiences & build skills for success**
- **5 Living Expert Peer Mentors Engaged**

- **\$56,400+ Education Support Funds Distributed**
- **\$1,000 Emergency Food Support Provided**
- **43% of participants experienced homelessness or housing insecurity, and 80% achieved temporary housing stability through targeted supports**

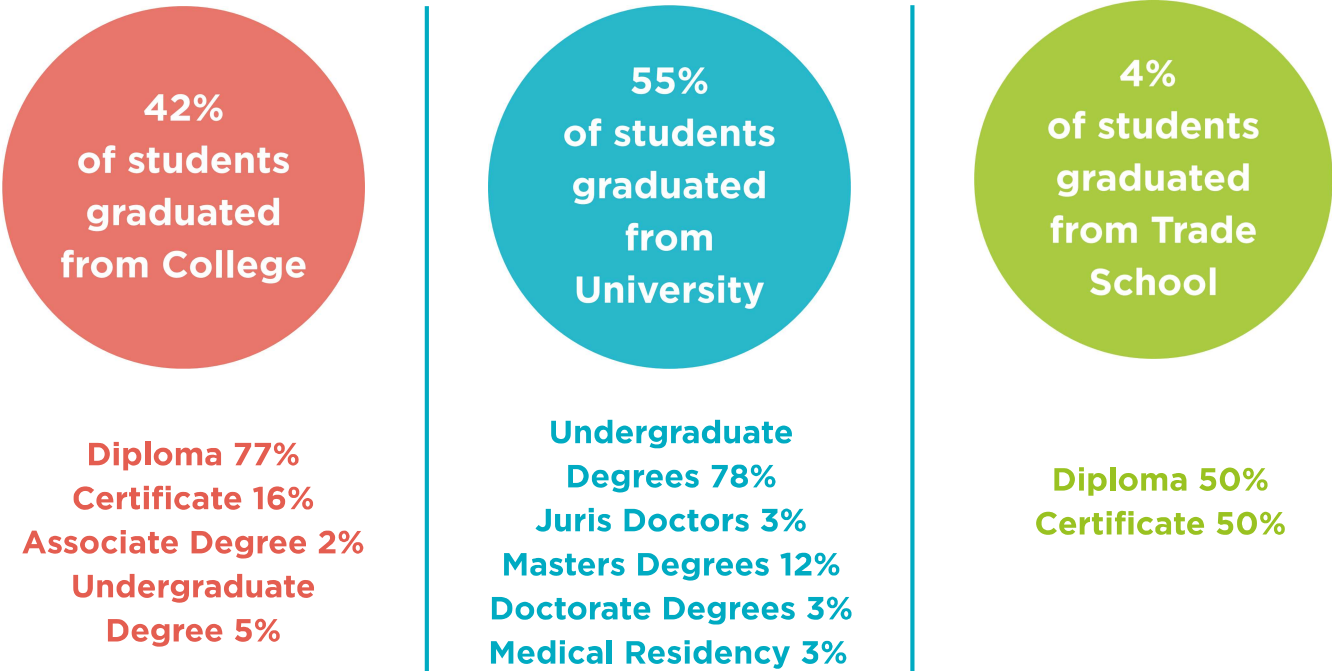
## Graduation Award

Students who have completed a program with the help of a CAFC Scholarship can apply for a Graduation Award, of up to \$2000, depending on the length of their program. The Graduation Award is structured in two parts, the initial application, and a follow-up survey eight months after, to understand students' current circumstances and ongoing needs in their journey from education towards their work and career goals.

### CAFC celebrated **106 graduates in 2025-26**

Collectively, graduates achieved a wide range of credentials—from certificates, diplomas, and applied bachelor's degrees to bachelor's, master's, doctoral, professional, and medical residency-level qualifications—demonstrating success across diverse academic, technical, and career-focused pathways.

# Graduation Award



The Graduation Award application asked graduates:

## Looking back on your time in school, what factors helped in your success?

The Graduates told us that the most important factors contributing to their success were **strong support networks (82%)**, **financial assistance (61%)**, and **personal resilience and determination (52%)**.

Students frequently mentioned the combined impact of family, friends, mentors, workers, and CAFC staff, in combination with scholarship funding in reducing barriers to education and enabling them to focus on their academic goals. Time management, mentorship, career purpose, and mental health supports were also significant contributors to their success.

### Support Systems Were the Most Important Factor (82%)

Students overwhelmingly cited the importance of family support, friends, peers and partners, CAFC Staff and social workers, mentors and professors.

### Financial Assistance Was Critical (61%)

More than half of respondents indicated they would have struggled—or been unable—to attend school—without financial support. That financial support reduced stress, allowed graduates to focus on school, reduced the number of hours a graduate needed to work, and that financial assistance made post-secondary education possible.

### Financial support and social support frequently worked together.

Many students indicated that funding reduced financial stress while supportive people helped them maintain motivation and navigate challenges.

# Graduation Award

## Strength of Resilience and Determination (52%)

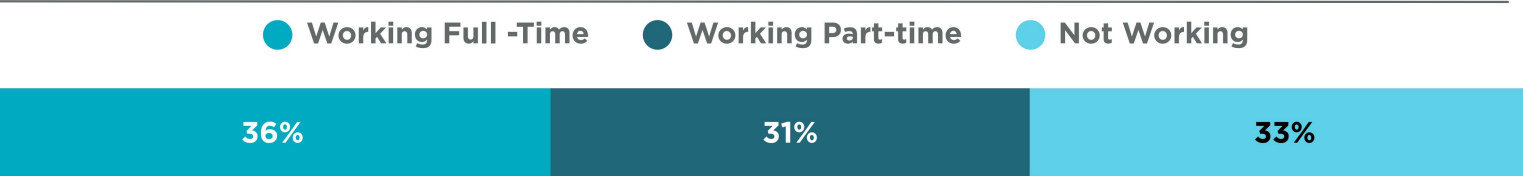
Many students emphasized grit, persistence, self-discipline and a refusal to give up in their determination to overcoming adversity, pushing through difficult life circumstances and remaining committed despite setbacks.

**Time management and organization (26%), mentorship and educational relationships (24%),** and a clear **sense of purpose and future goals (22%)** also played important roles. Graduates described how staying organized, managing deadlines, developing effective study habits, and planning helped them balance school with work, parenting, placements, and other personal responsibilities. They also emphasized the value of professors, instructors, advisors, and educational mentors who provided guidance, encouragement, academic support, and career advice. For many respondents, their motivation was strengthened by their desire to build a better future, help others, pursue a profession they were passionate about.

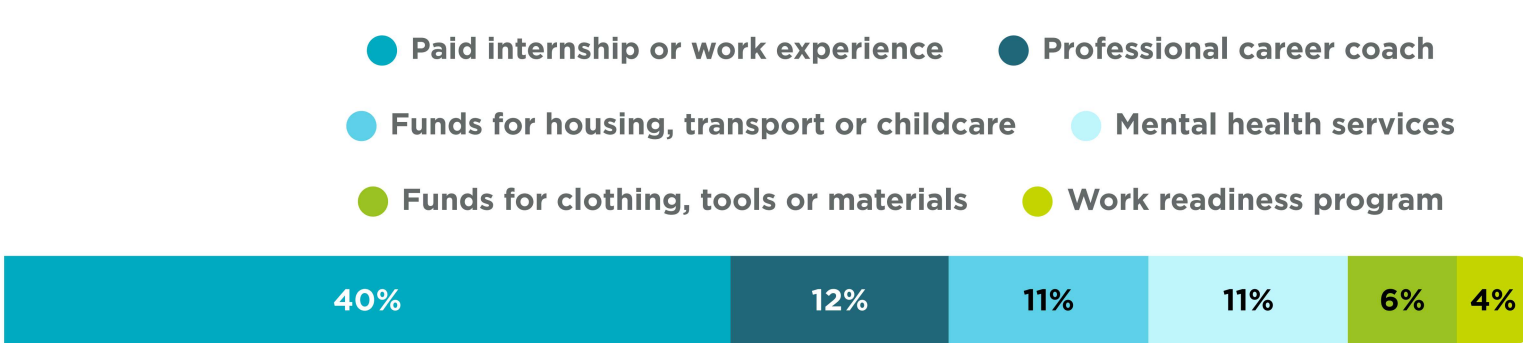
## Graduate Survey

To better understand graduate outcomes, recipients of the 2025-26 Graduation Award were surveyed in February 2026, approximately 6-8 months after submitting their original award application. The survey asked graduates about thier education, employment status, career development, and ongoing challenges as they transitioned beyond graduation.

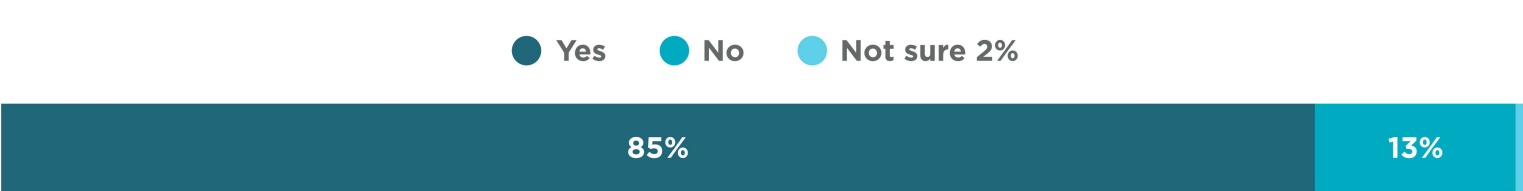
### Are you working now?



### What supports do you need to find career related work?



### Have your goals remained the same?

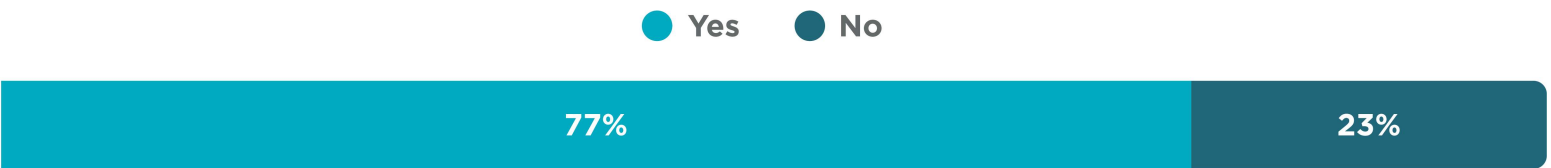


# Graduate Survey

## What are you doing now?



## Is your current activity helping you move toward your career goals?



## What challenges are you experiencing finding career related work?

The graduates told us the most significant challenge was difficulty securing employment, with approximately **42% citing a competitive job market, limited opportunities, and difficulty obtaining interviews**. One in five graduates (**21%**) **identified lack of experience** as a major barrier, noting that many entry-level positions require prior experience. Other common challenges included **balancing work, school, and family responsibilities (19%)**, financial pressures such as **housing costs, debt, and professional licensing expenses (17%)**, and difficulties building **professional networks and industry connections (11%)**.

### Employment Challenges Dominate (42%)

Graduates reported the most significant challenge was obtaining employment. That there were few opportunities for new graduates in a competitive labour market, where employers are choosing experienced candidates.

### Barriers to Gaining Career Experience (21%)

Graduates described the challenge of needing experience to gain employment, with entry level jobs requiring experienced candidates, that experience is difficult to obtain because of limited work experience co-op and internship opportunities.

### Financial Pressures Continue After Graduation (17%)

Graduates continue to face significant financial pressures as they transition into the workforce, citing the rising cost of living, housing affordability challenges, student debt, the costs associated with professional licensing exams and graduate education, and relocation expenses as barriers.

# Graduate Survey

The graduates tell us that transitioning from education to meaningful employment is the primary challenge they face. Like the transition from child welfare into post-secondary education, the move from graduation to career-related employment is a pivotal period that often requires continued support, particularly in today's challenging economic environment.

## In Conclusion

CAFC is committed to the transformative impact post-secondary education can have on the lives of young people. We are especially grateful to the remarkable students and graduates who generously shared their experiences, challenges, achievements, and aspirations that made up this report. Their resilience, determination, and insights inspire everything we do. As we look ahead to 2026–27, we remain committed to learning alongside youth and ensuring that their voices shape the ongoing development of our programs, priorities, and strategic goals as we continue working together to improve their educational and employment outcomes.

## Congratulations to the 2025-26 Graduates

Ahmed  
Human Rights and Human Diversity  
Wilfrid Laurier University

Aidan  
Liberal Arts  
University of Waterloo

Alex  
Master of Science, Statistics  
University of Manitoba

Alicia  
Child and Youth Care  
Fanshawe College

Almina  
Aerospace Engineering  
Toronto Metropolitan University

Amanda  
Social Work  
University of British Columbia

Amanda  
Society, Culture, and Religion  
McMaster University

April  
Master of Public Health  
with Specialization in Nursing  
Lakehead University

April  
Forensic Psychology  
and Criminal Justice  
Brock University

Ashlee  
Social Work  
University of Waterloo

Ashley  
Baking  
and Pastry Arts Management  
Algonquin College

Ashlynn  
Early Childhood Education  
Sheridan College

Austin  
Occupational Therapist  
and Physiotherapist Assistant  
Fanshawe College

Bella  
Plant Science  
Honours, University of Guelph

Beswarick  
Criminology, Honours  
University of Ottawa

Breanna  
Child and Youth Care  
Douglas College

Breanna  
Criminology and Social Justice  
Toronto Metropolitan University

Brittany  
Social Work  
University of Calgary

Caitlyn  
Nursing  
University of Manitoba

Cam  
Child and Youth Care  
Humber College

Caitlyn  
Nursing  
University of Manitoba

Cam  
Child and Youth Care  
Humber College

Camila  
Business Management  
Douglas College

Carolyn  
Computer Science  
with Data Analytics  
Wilfrid Laurier University

Cesar  
Philosophy and Psychology, Honours  
University of Waterloo

Charmia  
Chemical Laboratory Technician  
Durham College

Christabel  
Kinesiology  
and Health Science, Honours  
York University

Conner  
Juris Doctor  
Osgoode Hall Law School

Corrinna  
Pediatrics Residency Program (ACGME)  
Loyola University Medical Center

Daniella  
Social Service Worker  
Sheridan College

Daryn  
Psychology, Honours,  
Minors in Criminology and Gender Studies  
Wilfrid Laurier University

Donna  
Commerce, Honours  
University of Manitoba

Eartha  
PhD Geosciences  
Utrecht University

Elizabeth  
Graphic Design  
St. Clair College

Elizabeth  
Health Sciences,  
Minor in Indigenous Studies  
Simon Fraser University

Emily  
General Arts and Sciences  
St. Lawrence College

Emily  
Environmental Sustainability  
Lakehead University

Ericka  
Community and Justice Services  
Algonquin College

Farid  
Post Graduate Italian Culinary Arts  
George Brown College

Fiza  
Indigenous Honours of Social Work  
Laurentian University

# The 2025-26 Graduates

Gayna  
Medical Office Assistant  
and Unit Clerk  
Heritage College

George  
Police Foundations  
Humber College

Hanbir  
Addictions and Mental Health  
Humber College

Haranyaa  
Master of Social Work  
University of Toronto

Hasiba  
Education  
Wilfrid Laurier University

Helen  
Classic + Volume Refresher  
DashLashez

Jackie  
Psychology  
York University

Jaden  
Hairstyling  
Fleming College

Jalen  
Crane Operation, Rigging,  
and Construction Techniques  
Durham College

James  
Social Work  
University of the Fraser Valley

Jessie  
Veterinary Assistant  
Robertson College

Joe  
Police Foundations  
St. Clair College

Jolene  
Culinary Arts  
Fanshawe College

Julia  
Equity Studies,  
Minors in Woman  
and Gender Studies  
and Transnational Studies  
University of Toronto

Katelyn  
Early Childhood Education  
Assiniboine Community College

Kendal  
Nursing  
University of Saskatchewan

Kyel  
University Transfer Program  
Sheridan College

Laurin  
Master of Business Administration  
Brock University

Lauryn  
Law and Society, Honours  
York University

Lucifer  
Social Service Worker  
Confederation College

Marissa  
Child and Youth Studies  
Brock University

Marko  
Master of Arts, Human Development,  
Learning, and Culture  
University of British Columbia

Marwa  
Project Management Professional  
Project Management Institute

Mary  
Indigenous Studies  
Camosun College

Matthew  
Social Service Worker  
Durham College

Michael  
Kinesiology  
University of Western Ontario

Michelle  
Child and Youth Care  
Algonquin College

Mickey  
Nursing  
Toronto Metropolitan University

Miranda  
French, Minor in English  
Dalhousie University

Missy  
Early Childhood Education  
St. Clair College

Moana  
Flight Services Operation  
and Cabin Management  
Seneca College

Muzaina  
Medical Office Administration  
Computeek College

Nancy  
Data Analytics, Big Data  
and Predictive Analytics  
Toronto Metropolitan University

Nancy  
Personal Support Worker  
Mohawk College

Nathan  
Associate of Arts  
Camosun College

Nel  
Firefighter Pre-Service Training  
Centennial College

Nicki  
Business Marketing  
Algonquin College

Nicole  
Social Work  
University of Calgary

Noor  
Commerce, Honours  
York University

Rachel  
Early Childhood Leadership, Honours  
Sheridan College

Regene  
Social Work, Minor in French  
Toronto Metropolitan University

Reila  
PhD Mathematics  
University of Toronto

Rukhsana  
Social Service Worker  
Conestoga College

Sebastian  
Game Development  
and Interactive Media, Honours  
Ontario Tech University

Sebastian  
University Transfer Certificate, Science  
Vancouver Community College

Serena  
Medicine  
McMaster University

Shannon  
Sociology  
University of Winnipeg

Shay-lynn  
Biology, Minor is Sociology  
University of Winnipeg

Shequera  
Health Policy  
York University

Shyanne  
Indigenous Social Work  
University of Regina

Soh Christel  
Audio Production  
and Engineering, Music Mixing &  
Mastering  
Metalworks Institute

Soky  
Hospitality Magnagement  
Humber College

Sylvia  
Digital Futures, Experimental Animation  
Ontario College of Art and Design

Tammy  
Creative Writing and Publishing, Honours  
Sheridan College

Tara  
Criminology  
York University

Tash  
Social Work  
University of Calgary

Teagan  
Masters in Business Administration  
Vancouver Island University

Tiyana  
Early Childhood Education  
Centennial College

Tobi  
Law (JD/ BCL)  
McGill University

Tobias  
English and History, Double Major, Minor  
in Youth and Child  
Wilfrid Laurier University

Travis  
Electrical Engineering  
University of British Columbia

Vahida  
Cybersecurity  
ABM College

Vivienne  
Practical Nursing  
Centennial College

Whitney  
Early Childhood Education  
Humber College

Yasmine  
Master of Social Work  
University of Windsor

Ziggy  
Music Business Management  
Durham College

Zoe  
Social Science, Mathematics  
Cegep Heritage College