



From Access to Success: Exploring Post-Secondary Completion and Outcomes

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About Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC)



An independent, non-partisan, non-profit research organization and registered charitable organization with a two-part mission:

- 1) Help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged
- 2) Raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies and programs



Since 1991, SRDC is best known for large-scale experimental tests of new programs: learn\$ave, Career Motion, Future to Discover, BC AVID, UPSKILL, Life After High School



Employs 50+ multidisciplinary staff across Canada with a range of skills and experience, including program administration, quantitative and qualitative research, collective impact evaluation, benefit-cost analysis, survey design, data analytics

Overview of today's presentation

Present findings from a HEQCO-funded project on non-completion in Ontario that:

- Studied system-wide non-completion in the Ontario postsecondary education (PSE) system – *generated evidence on the extent of the issue*
- Through new data linkages, undertook detailed sub-group analysis – *generated evidence on who is more likely to experience it*
- Use cost-benefit analysis (CBA) to measure the individual and social costs of students' non-completion – *generated evidence on the potential monetary benefit of completing for students, institutions, governments, and society*

Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario



Conseil ontarien
de la qualité de
l'enseignement supérieur

Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Overview of today's presentation

How does mental health relate to non-completion?

People leave for varying reasons (program fit, family obligations, financial constraints)

- Many interventions shown promise in addressing malleable factors (e.g., *students' motivation, academic skills, social integration, identification with and commitment to PSE*)

Prior studies show that high stress, anxiety, depression, and substance use are often positively associated with early leaving

(e.g., Mojtabai et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2025; Zajac et al., 2023)

- The relationship between mental health and early leaving varies for different populations and level of institution, program, and social support

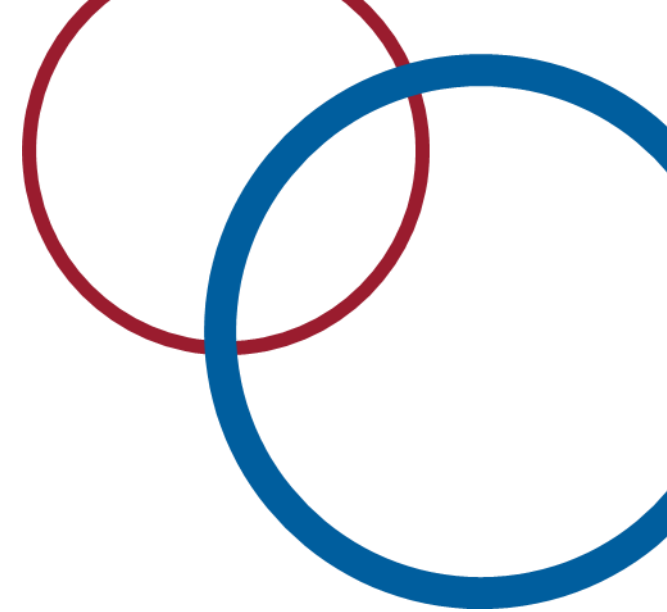
Two phases of the project

Phase 1

- Provided a definition of non-completion
- Measured non-completion across student and program characteristics in Ontario
- Compared post-schooling outcomes between completers and non-completers
- *Key results: Approximately 25% of students didn't earn a credential within seven years and were earning approximately 50 per cent less than graduates in their first year after leaving PSE*

Phase 2

- Studied the net costs of non-completion for various stakeholders involved
- Included a third group: *equivalent people who do not attend PSE*
- *Key results: On average, students financially benefit from their time in PSE, compared to if they had not participated at all. However, graduates benefit more than non-completers (~\$380,000 in their lifetime).*

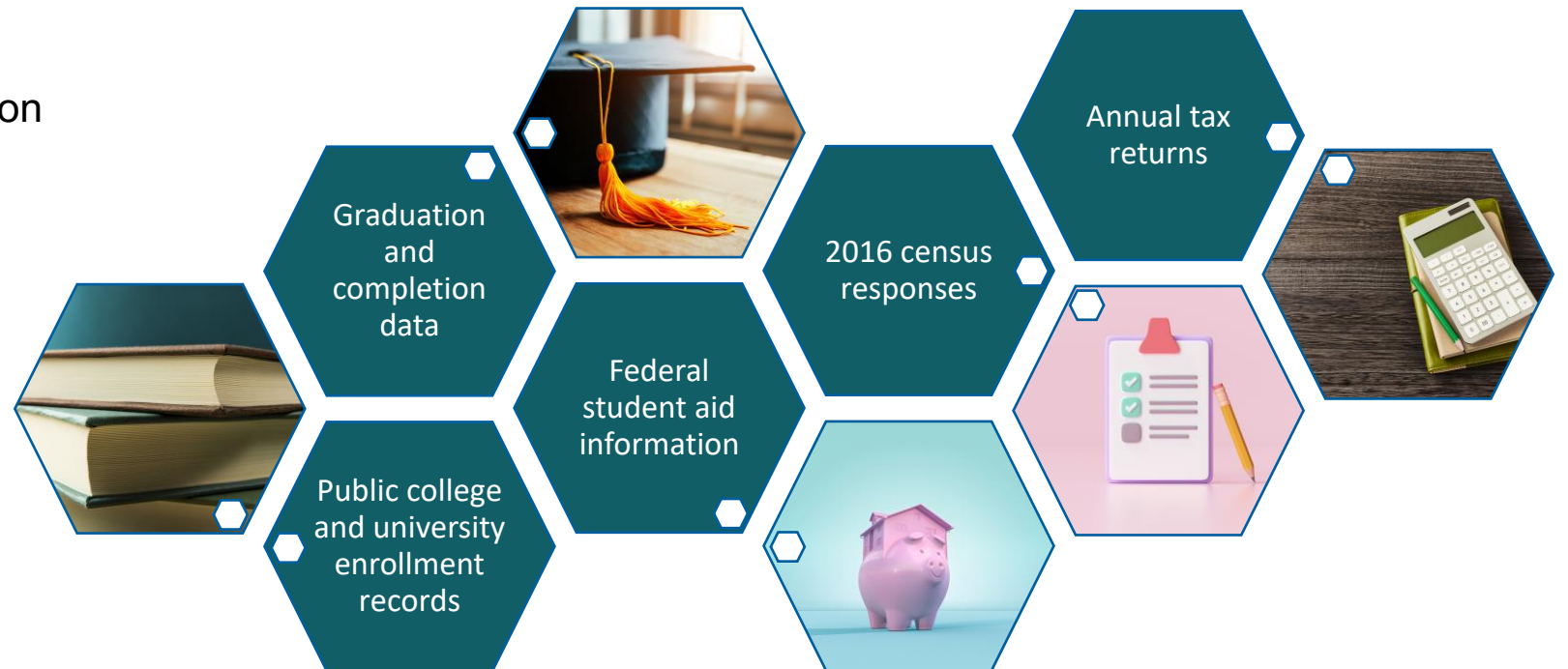


Phase 1: Non-completion rates & labour market outcomes

The Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform (ELMLP)

Linked administrative and survey data from multiple source:

- Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS)
- Registered Apprenticeship Information System (RAIS)
- 2016 Census data
- Canada Student Loan Program (CSLP) data
- T1 Family File (T1FF)



A “system-wide” approach

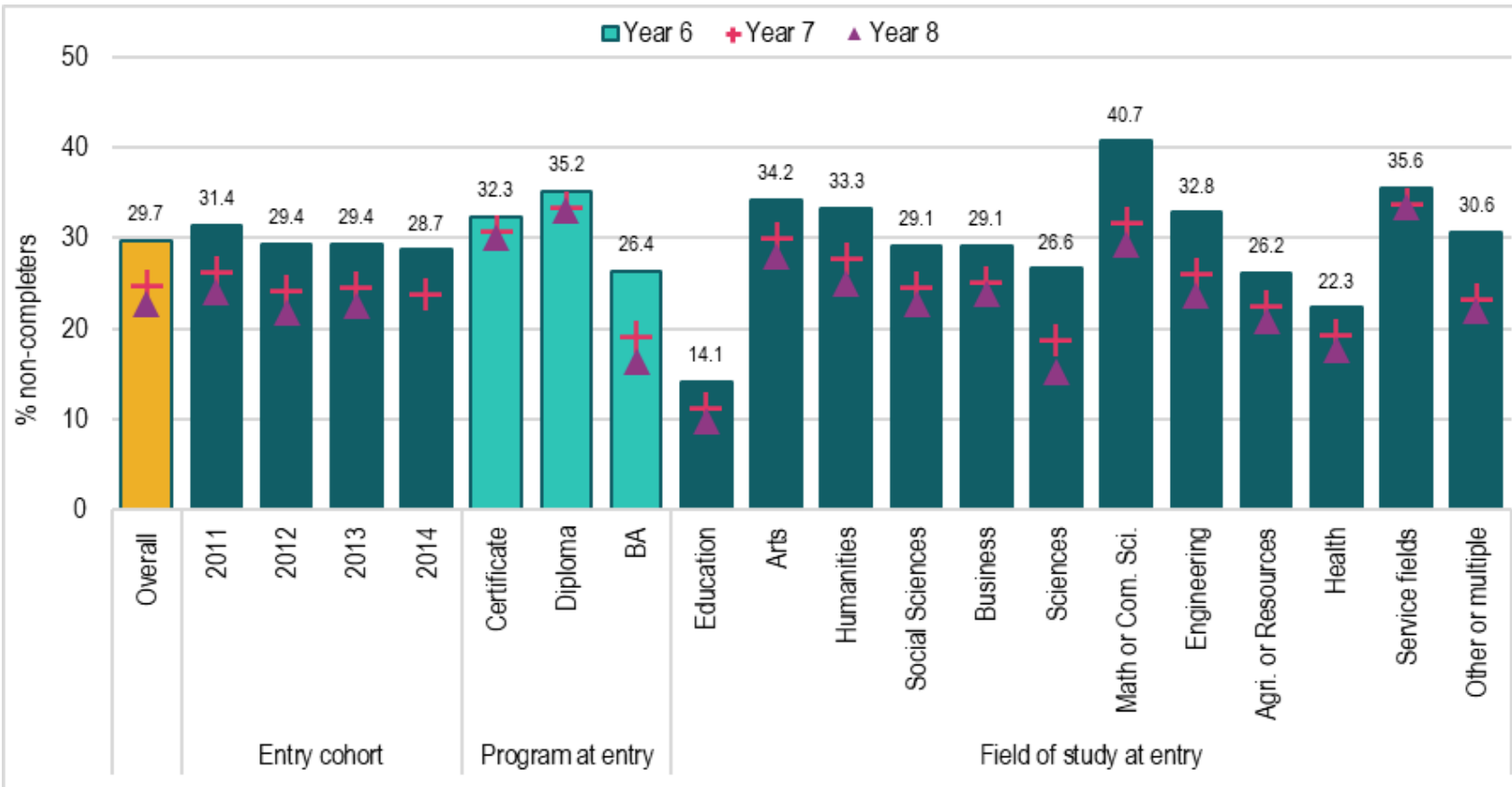
A “system-wide” approach **examined time to completion**, even if a student transferred or paused their studies

- Captures any program completion within 6, 7, and 8 years of starting PSE
- Long enough to allow for changes and breaks, yet short enough for the outcome to be reasonably associated with the initial enrollment

The students in our study (n=584,310)

- ✓ Students who started a full-time diploma, certificate, or undergraduate program in the fall semester
- ✓ Attended a public Ontario college or university
- ✓ Four cohorts: started between 2011 to 2014
- ✓ No restriction by age, but must not have been observed as enrolled in previous two years
- ✓ Can transition and graduate elsewhere across Canada, including from an apprenticeship program

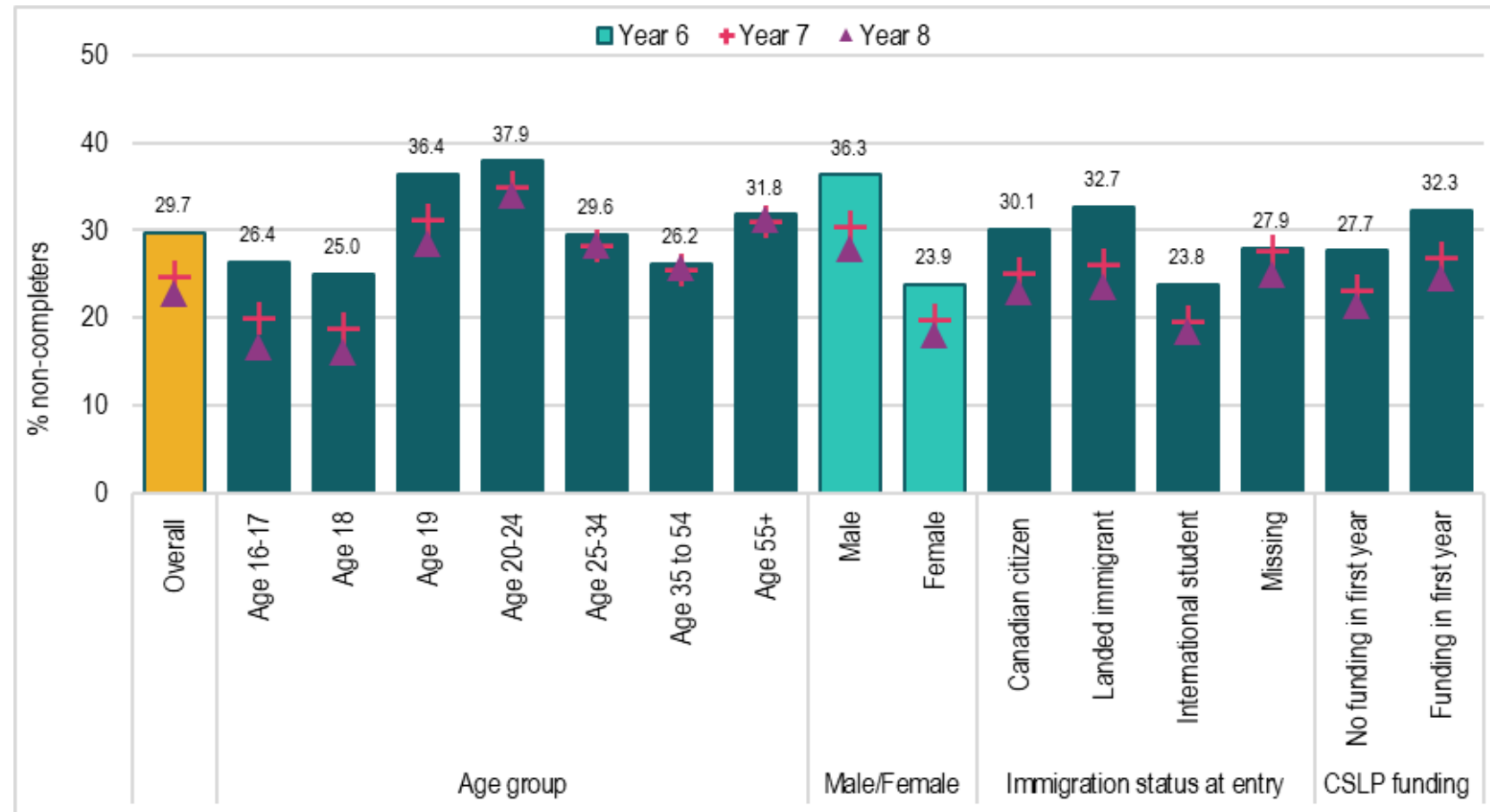
Non-completion rates by cohort and program



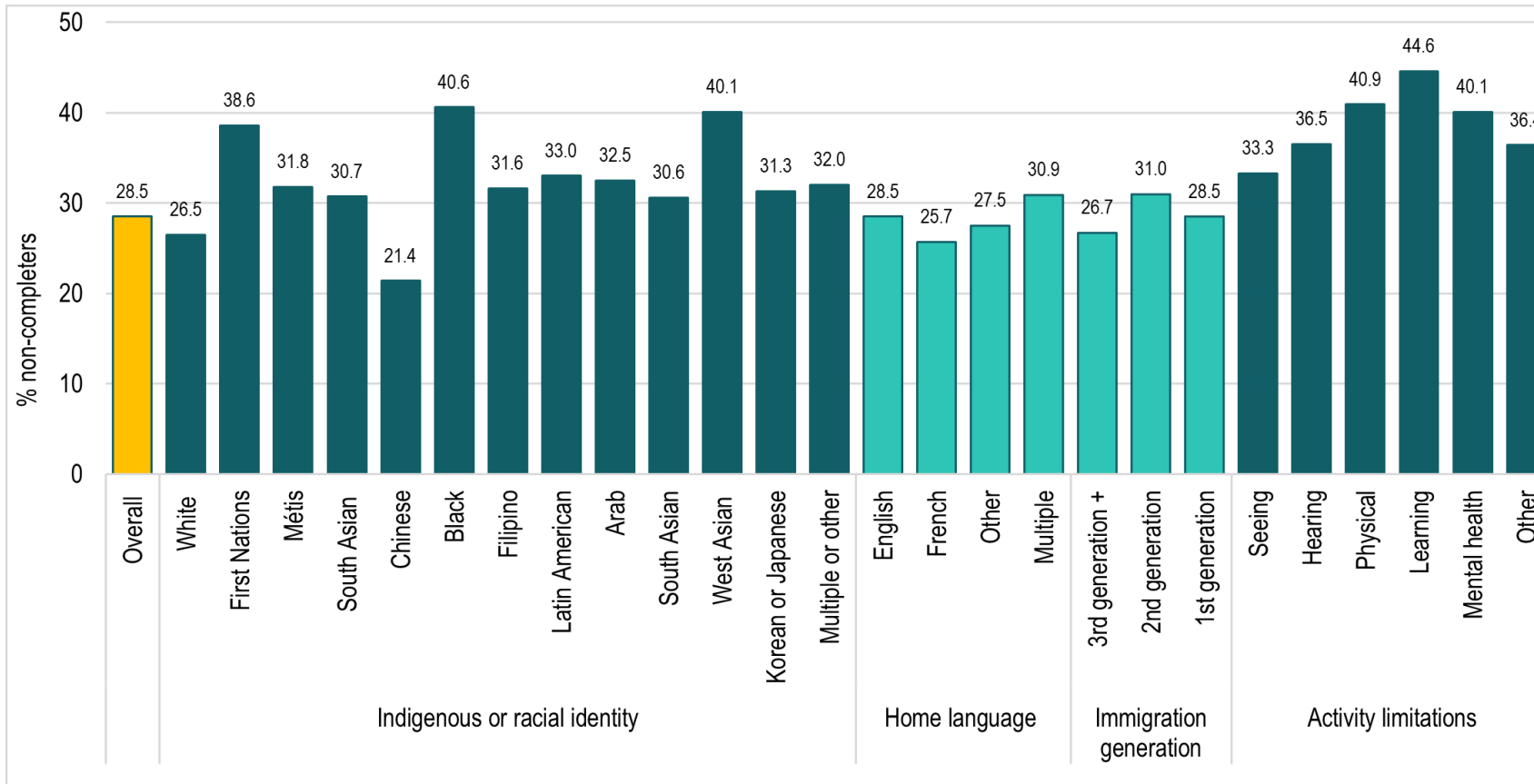
- After six years, 1-in-3 students were non-completers. Reduced to 1-in-4 after eight years
- Non-completion was higher for diploma programs and lower for undergraduate programs
- Non-completion was lower for Education programs and higher for Math/Computer Science programs

Non-completion rates by student characteristics

- Non-completion was lowest for students who were aged 18. It increased for students with delayed entry (aged 19, 20-24)
- Female and international students had lower non-completion rates compared to their counterparts
- Students with CSLP funding had slightly higher non-completion rates compared to those without this student aid



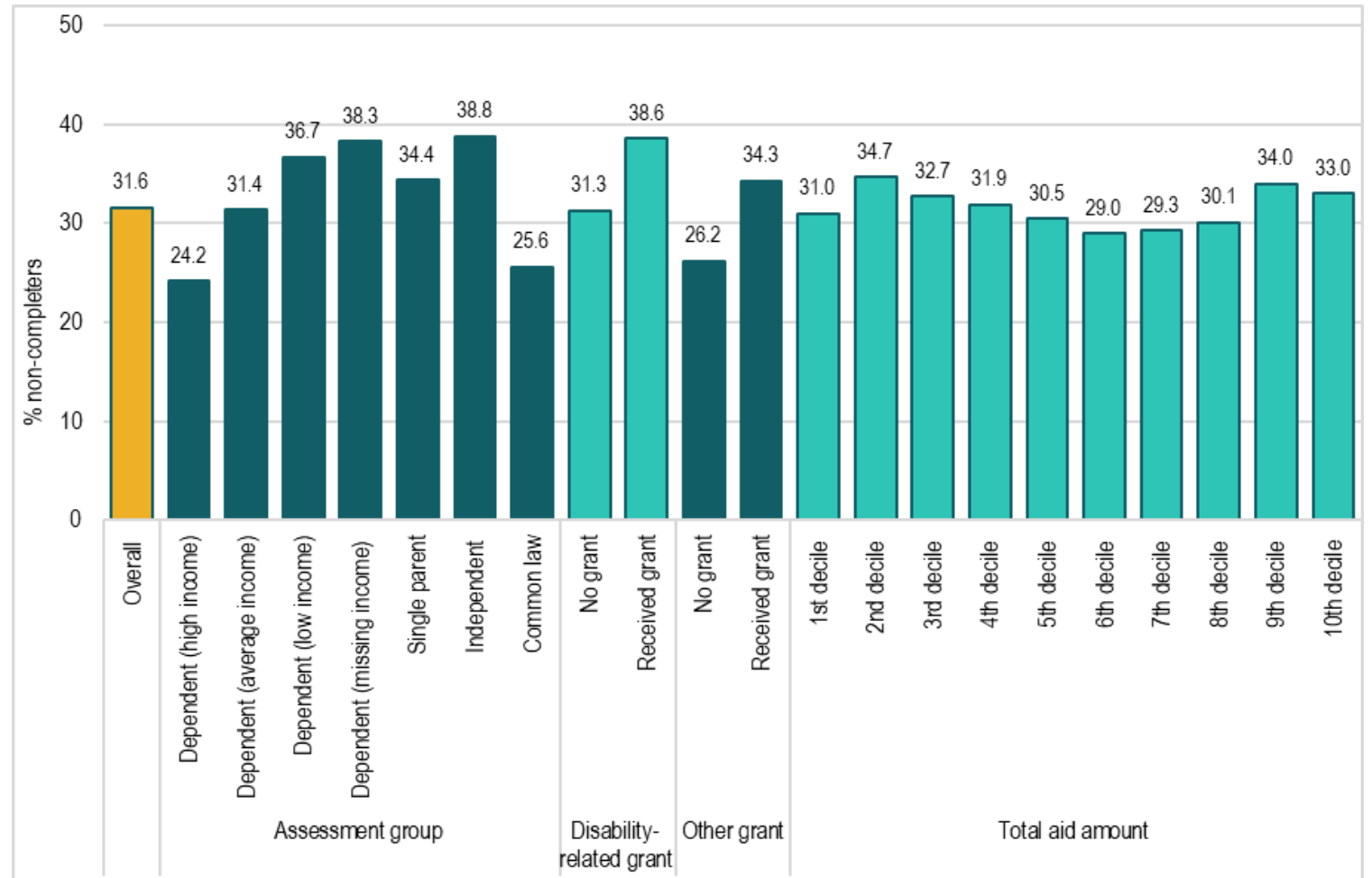
Non-completion rates by Census characteristics



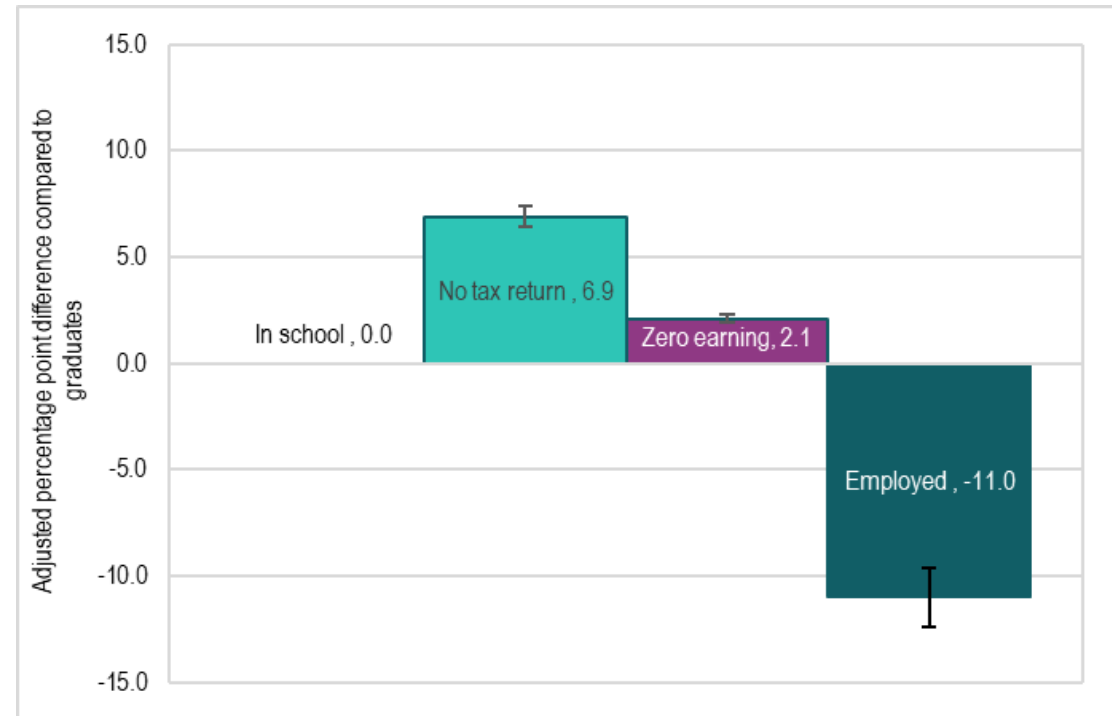
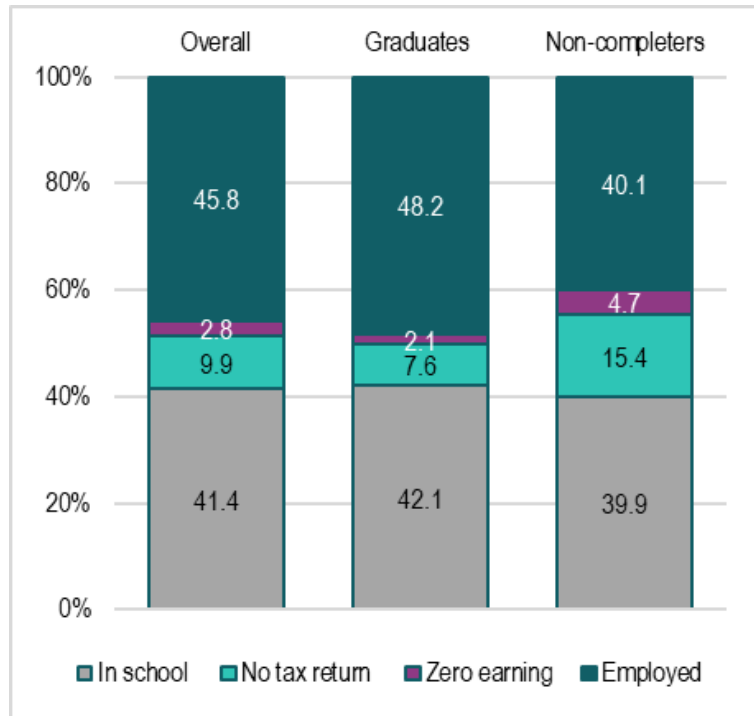
- White and Chinese students had lower rates of non-completion, while First Nations, Black, and West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan) students had higher rates
- Students who reported an activity limitation were more likely to be non-completers, particularly if they reported a physical, learning, or mental health limitation

Non-completion rates by student aid characteristics

- Dependent applicants from households with high parental income and common-law applicants were less likely to be non-completer
- Being a grant recipient was associated with non-completion, identifying students who faced barriers to completing PSE
- Both the descriptive and regression results found no relationship between the amount of student aid and non-completion

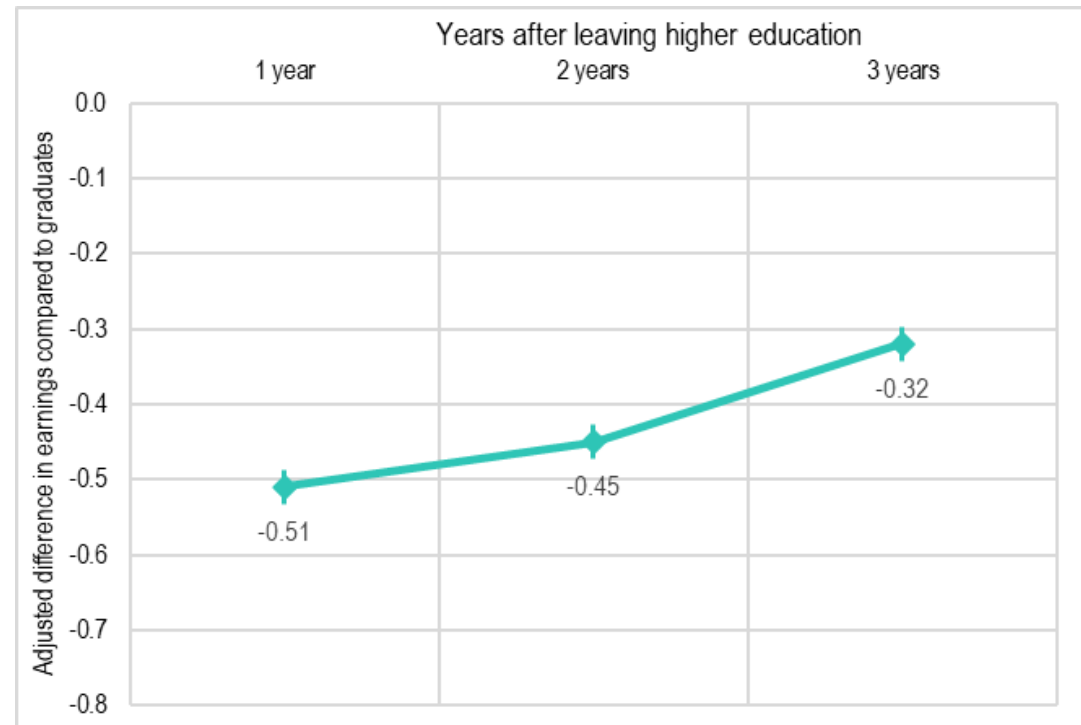
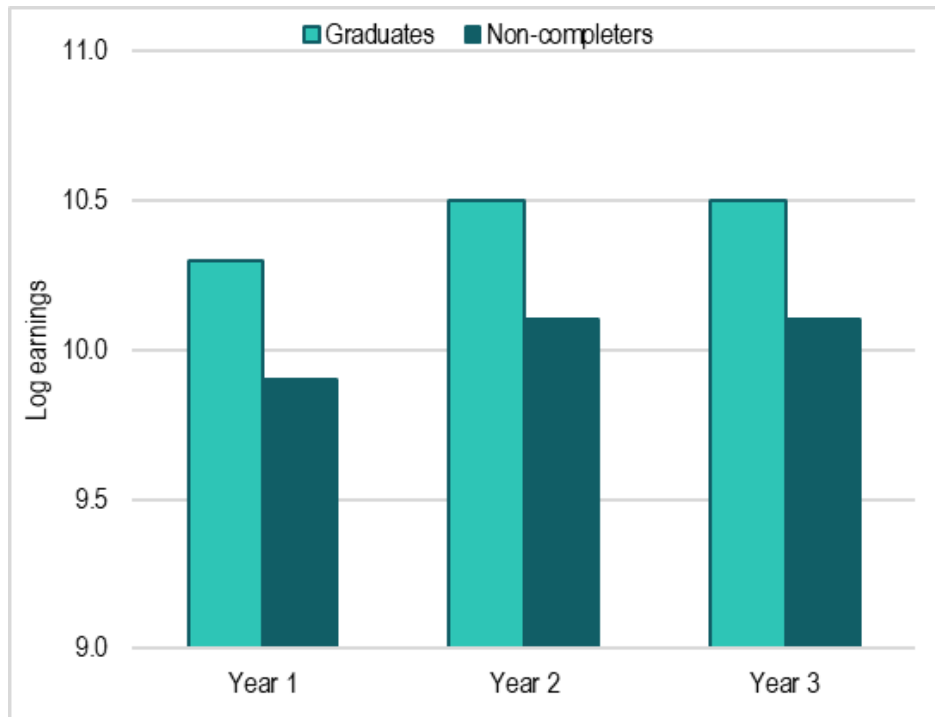


Economic activity results: Descriptive and regression results

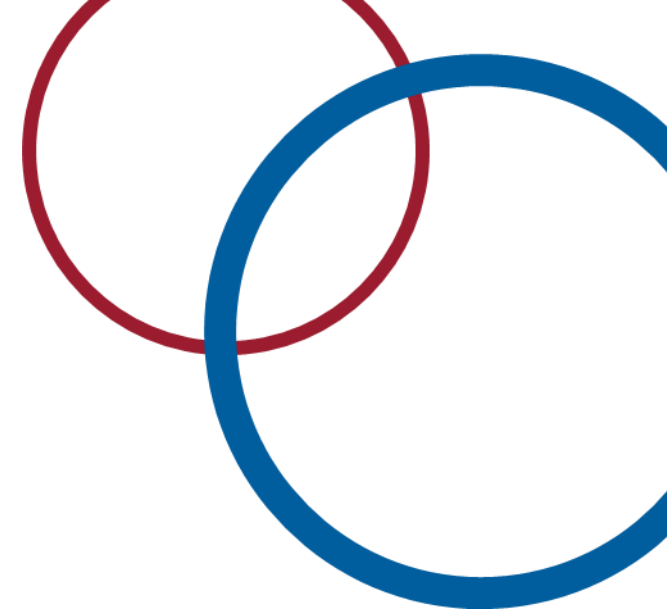


- A high percentage of non-completers and graduates remained or returned to school
- Compared to graduates, non-completers were more likely to have no tax return and less likely to report employment earnings

Earnings results: Descriptive and regression results



- There was a large first-year earnings gap for non-completers
- Once a model controlled for all observed factors, one-year post-PSE earnings of non-completers were 51 per cent lower than graduates, although the gap decreased over time



Phase 2: Net costs of non-completion

An overview of cost-benefit analysis (CBA)

A systematic approach to evaluate the total expected costs and benefits of a program, action, or activity

1. **Identify costs:** direct, indirect, intangible, opportunity costs (e.g., unemployment while learning)
2. **Identify benefits:** direct, indirect, intangible (e.g., improved networks) – both short and long term
3. **Assign monetary values to all costs and benefits**
4. **Calculate benefit-cost ratio:** net costs are a concern when they are positive (i.e., when the activity's costs exceed its benefits)

Estimation approach: Comparison groups

SRDC set out to derive the 'net costs' of non-completion by comparing the costs and benefits to key stakeholders of two scenarios (2013 entry cohort):

1. **Non-completion:** participating in Ontario PSE without completing (7 years after starting a BA, credential, or diploma full time)
2. **Completion:** The 'same' people participating in Ontario PSE and completing

*Both scenarios developed estimates relative to the 'same' counterfactual: equivalent people not participating in PSE at all (**non-participation**)

The difference between both scenarios is the net cost of non-completion

Estimation approach: Stakeholder perspectives



Costs and benefits impact different stakeholders



Each cost of non-completion may be negative (a benefit) for one stakeholder, but positive for another

Stakeholder	Examples
Participants	Tuition paid; lifetime earnings
PSE institutions	Tuition and government transfer received; administration, capital costs
Governments (Provincial & Federal)	Taxes and premiums; social assistance usage
Society	A net cost to society arises when the costs summed across individuals and governments outweigh the benefits

Estimation approach: Tuition example

Net costs of non-completion = Scenario 1 – Scenario 2

$$\$11,000 - \$20,000 = -\$9,000^*$$

* From the perspective of the student, where a negative net cost is a “benefit.” Equivalently from PSE institution perspective less tuition is a “cost.”

Scenario 1: Cost of non-completion

Non-completion – non-participation

$$\$11,000 - \$0 = \$11,000$$

Scenario 2: Cost of completion

Completion – non-participation

$$\$20,000 - \$0 = \$20,000$$

What are the outcomes for students who participate in postsecondary education (PSE) in Ontario?



Graduate High School



Start PSE

+\$220,000

Compared to not participating, a student who attends some PSE gains about \$220,000 over their lifetime.



Graduate PSE

+\$601,000

Compared to not participating, a student who completes PSE gains about \$601,000 over their lifetime.



Leave PSE

-\$382,000

Compared to completing, a student who doesn't complete PSE loses out on about \$382,000 over their lifetime.



Join the Workforce

Even some PSE brings benefits—but completion unlocks the full value. Without a credential, students miss out on substantial long-term gains.

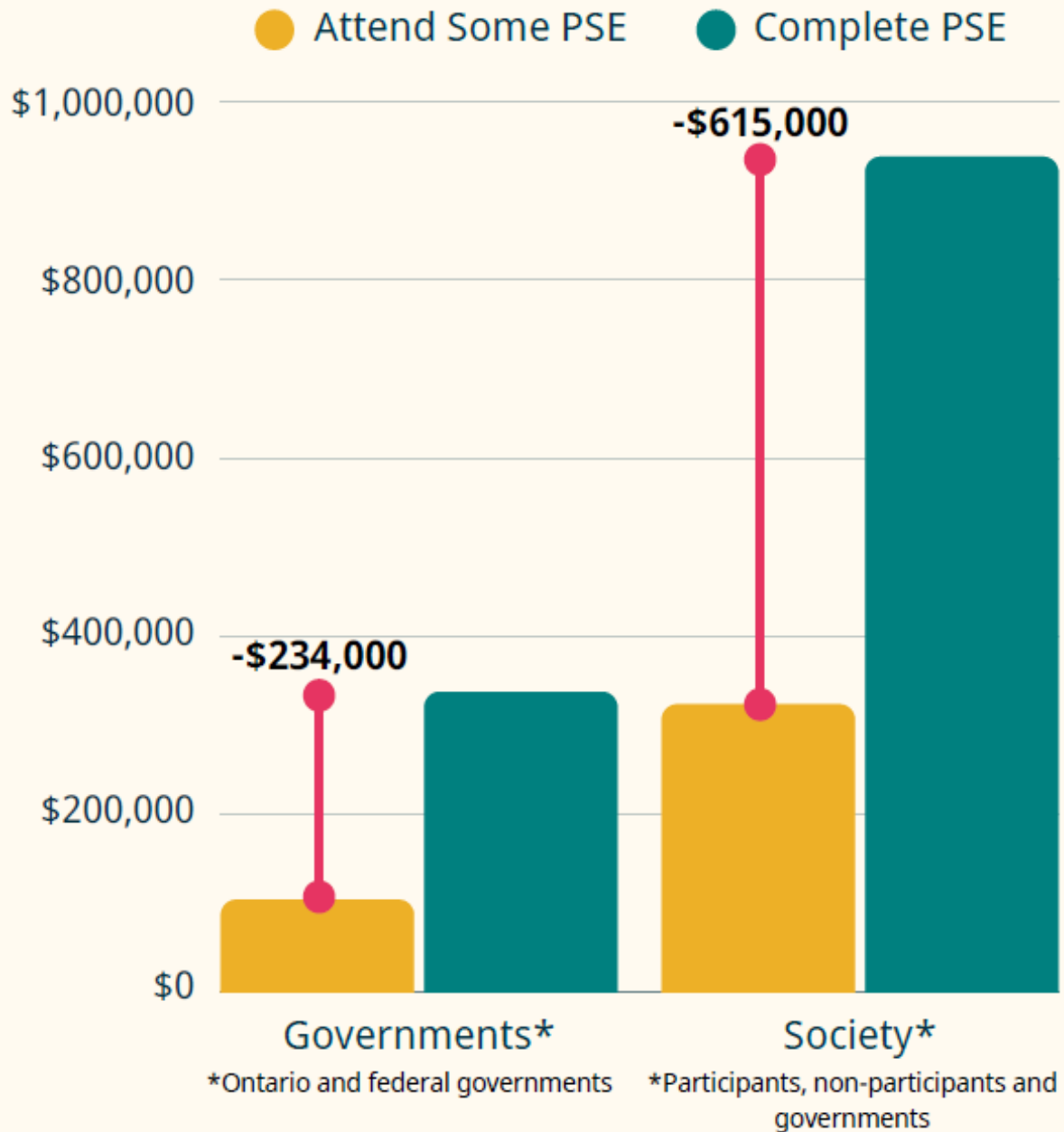
What does this mean for governments and society?

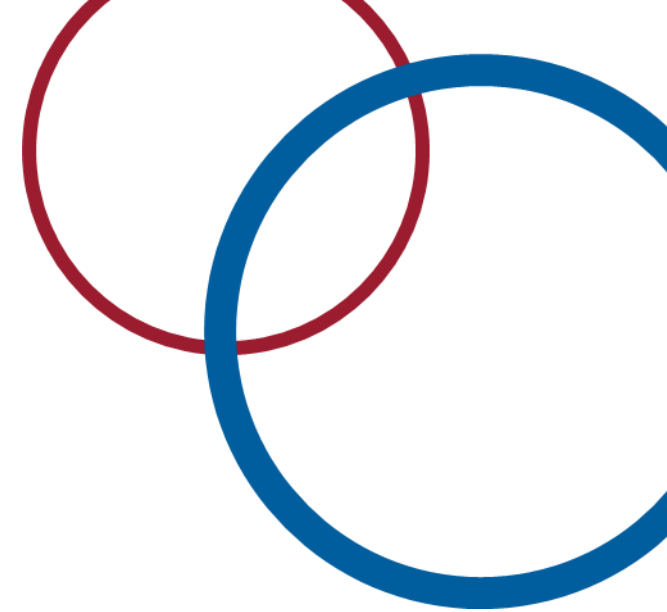


When students complete PSE, there are significant benefits to governments and society.



Much of these potential gains are lost when students leave PSE without a credential.





Implications for Student Mental Health

Key findings and implications

Non-completion rates & labour market outcomes

- 6-year outcome: 1-in-3 certificate/diploma students and 1-in-4 BA students did not leave with a credential in hand
- **Non-completers earned approximately 50 per cent less** than graduates when entering the labour market
- Certain program and background factors are associated with non-completion

Net cost analysis

- For individuals, governments, and society, **the decision to take up PSE is (on average) the right one regardless of whether student's go on to complete**
- If non-completers can be supported to complete, **there is potential for substantial return to this investment** for individuals, governments, and society

Our work provides strong justification for investing in programs that promote completion

Investing in student mental health

In-person supports

Increasing students' institutional attachment

- Case management
- Comprehensive wraparound supports
- Peer-to-peer support
- Embedded mental health services

Low touch interventions

Leveraging technology to support student engagement

- LMS-based engagement (e.g., reminders of deadlines)
- Text messaging campaigns on available resources
- Using data to inform human response for early intervention

Recent SRDC projects supporting student mental health

The College Consortium for Mental Health Project

Overview:

- SRDC and CICMH partnered with five colleges to apply the National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students (CSA Z2003:20)
- and use the Campus Mental Health Action Tracker

Over two phases of work partners worked to:

- Determine how mental health-related policy, programming, and practice align and diverge
- Share common strengths and challenges
- Learn promising practices

The Campus Mental Health Action Tracker

An implementation tool:

- To support institutional collaboration and alignment with the Standard and provincial reporting needs
- Tracks, assesses, and visualizes a campus' progress in both English and French

Guided by principles of:

- Student-centred practice
- Equity, diversity and inclusion
- Knowledge-informed health promotion & reducing harm
- Thriving community and culture of wellbeing
- Continuous improvement

Access the free, bilingual, online platform





Thank you!

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