

Consultation on Building a Modern Employment Insurance Program

Submission to the Government of Canada

October 2021

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) is the national voice of academic staff, representing the interests of 72,000 professors, academic librarians, researchers, and general staff at over 120 universities and colleges across the country. We welcome the opportunity to provide input on the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program as the government embarks on what we hope will be ambitious reform.

Our interest in the EI program is three-fold. First, at least one-third of academic staff in the country are employed on a short-term basis, many relying on EI for income support between contracts. Second, as an association representing labour and employee organizations, we stand in solidarity through our National Union of CAUT with the Canadian Labour Congress, and echo many of labour's concerns and proposals. Third, as educators, we have a specific interest in EI support for the education and training of workers.

The Employment Insurance program is essential to Canada's social safety net. Reforms and changes introduced over the last two decades have significantly reduced access to EI and penalize those who cannot secure a permanent job in their field of expertise. It is also not reflective of the rise of precarious employment. Pre-pandemic, only two in five unemployed workers were receiving EI benefits in any given month. The comprehensive review is timely and can draw on lessons learned from income support during the pandemic to ensure much wider access to a better program.

Increasing access and support for precarious workers

At universities and colleges across Canada, an increasing number of academic staff are working in non-standard employment. Contrary to those who argue that contract academic staff (CAS) are picking up extra income on the side while studying or working elsewhere, a survey of CAS found that only one in five respondents had non-academic full-time, permanent work. A typical pattern of CAS employment is to have contracts for the fall and/or

winter terms, leaving CAS without income over the summer months.

The pandemic exacerbated job insecurity for CAS. In a [survey of academic staff](#) undertaken in the early days of the public health crisis, those working part-time before the pandemic were more likely to be no longer working.

The changes to income support programs, including EI, during the pandemic were welcome and overdue. Moving forward, CAUT joins the Canadian Labour Congress, in calling for the following changes to improve access to better income support for displaced, seasonal and precarious workers.

Recommendations:

- Create a single national entrance requirement equal to the lesser of 360 hours or 12 weeks;
- Permanently remove the one week waiting period during which no benefits are payable;
- Provide a liveable minimum individual benefit;
- Increase the ceiling on insurable earnings;
- Eliminate penalties for frequent users, such as CAS who are laid off year after year when universities and colleges close or reduce course offerings over the summer period.
- Remove the disqualification for workers that are fired or quit.
- Permit access to EI during labour disputes, including during an employer lock out; and re-affirm access to EI special benefits during a labour dispute;
- Remove the 50-week limit on combined special benefits and unemployment benefits. This is particularly important for [women, who are over-represented](#) in the precarious academic workforce and are

more likely to need special benefits and income support from loss of employment;

- Restore migrant workers' access to special benefits and remove restrictions on migrants' access to regular benefits. In 2018, almost 6000 university professors and lecturers held work permits under the International Mobility Program or the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

Education and Training

We recognize that the federal government will be undertaking more extensive consultations on this specific aspect, among others, of the EI program over the coming months. We look forward to more information and engagement as the consultations continue and will be urging the government to provide benefit eligibility to those leaving a job to attend school or training and ensure EI income support is provided for the full duration of a study program.

Premium Reduction Program

There is high union density in the academic sector, and as a result, those in traditional employment arrangements have strong access to income protection programs for disability. University and college employers are therefore more likely than not to be part of the Premium Reduction Program. We know, however, of at least [one case](#), where employees did not receive a portion of the employer's savings until their union filed a grievance. There are possibly other such cases. We therefore look forward to working with the government to find ways to ensure awareness and proper implementation of this program.

Conclusion

CAUT welcomes this opportunity to input into the first phase of the consultations on EI reform. We look forward to expanding on the above and providing further recommendations as the government takes a deeper dive on benefits, premiums, governance and financing.