

CANADIAN POLITICS

Missing government hard drive also contained business plans, financial information of thousands of Canadians, emails suggest



JORDAN PRESS, POSTMEDIA NEWS | 13/04/09 | Last Updated: 13/04/09 8:40 PM ET



Damian Dovarganes / AP files A missing hard drive from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada may have contained more than the sensitive, personal information of about 583,000 Canadians.

OTTAWA — A missing hard drive from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada may have contained more than the sensitive, personal information of about 583,000 Canadians.

Internal emails suggest the data stored on the hard drive included business plans and financial information about the Canada Student Loan program, as well as “investigative reports” that go until August 2012 about loan applicants whose eligibility were questionable. The emails also suggest that a number of those investigations focused on the 583,000 student loan recipients whose names, social insurance numbers and addresses were on the drive that was last seen in late August.

“The last piece of course is the full scope of the potential breach: while I know that it involves all investigation records up to August 2012, it will take us some time to determine how many individual records this involves. It is definitely in the hundreds, but some of the files are so old, I have no idea if we would have current contact information for some of the individuals involved,” wrote Andrea Knight, then acting manager of compliance, to student loan program director Marc LeBrun on Nov. 27.

According to the department, student loan workers created the reports after investigations “to confirm the eligibility of a number of students for the (Canada Student Loan Program) including loans, grants, and repayment assistance.” In 2010-11, the most recent data available on the department’s website, the student loan program conducted 46 investigations of loan applicants, finding in 32 of those cases that the person didn’t qualify for a government grant.

The department said late Monday that the investigation into the student loan data loss, as well as the loss of a USB key containing personal information of more than 5,000 employment insurance recipients, are ongoing. However, the department would say little more in response to questions posted Monday about the status of the investigation, or any decisions regarding disciplinary actions against the employees involved in both breaches, saying “it would be inappropriate to provide further comment.”

The department did not answer follow up questions by Tuesday afternoon.

The breaches at HRSDC prompted the privacy commissioner to launch an investigation into what happened. In February, the probe into the lost USB key was widened to include the Department of Justice, because the last employee to have the USB drive was a lawyer on loan to HRSDC.

The results of the investigation will be made public, the privacy commissioner's office said this week.

"We're taking this very seriously and are committed to completing them in a timely fashion," said Anne-Marie Hayden, a spokeswoman for Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart.

HRSDC launched its internal investigation into the missing student loan information in late November, with security interviewing the employees involved, including two former employees of the department who were shuffled out of HRSDC as part of the government's downsizing of the bureaucracy. HRSDC wouldn't say whether the employees were laid off or moved to another department, but said they returned all departmental devices.

Staff also made multiple sweeps of four floors of national headquarters hoping to find the missing portable, external hard drive, but couldn't find the \$200 device.