Hello members of the Assembly,

The week of November 14 - 18, I travelled to Ottawa with Justin and Vicky to advocate to the federal government on behalf of student issues. The relevant briefs are attached, but the issues we advocated on behalf of were:

- Indigenous Students - the PSSSP cap
- Students with Disabilities - Canada Student Grants for Students with Permanent Disabilities eligibility and reimbursement amount for diagnostic assessment
- International Students - Express Entry program

We were advocating alongside the Wilfred Laurier University Students’ Union (WLUSU). We met with the following people:

- Filomena Tassi, MP for Hamilton West - Ancaster - Dundas
- Bardish Chagger, MP for Waterloo and Minister of Small Business and Tourism, Leader of Government in the House of Commons
- Pam Damoff, MP for Oakville North - Burlington
- Mark Gerretsen, MP for Kingston and the Thousand Islands
- Seamus O’Regan, MP for St. John’s South - Mount Pearl
- Bob Bratina, MP for Hamilton East - Stoney Creek
- Harold Albrecht, MP for Kitchener - Conestoga
- Celina Caesar-Chava, MP for Whitby, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister
- David Sweet, MP for Flamborough - Glanbrook
- Brian May, MP for Cambridge
- Lloyd Longfield, MP for Guelph, Chair of the Liberal Innovation & Post-Secondary Education Caucus
- Raj Saini, MP for Kitchener-Centre
- Lillian Eva Dyck, Saskatchewan Senator, Indigenous Rights Advocate
- Marco Mendicino, MP for Eglinton Lawerence
- Raj Grewal, MP for Brampton East
Overall we felt as though the week went very well. It appears as though CASA and ADVOCAN were also advocating on the PSSSP cap, which bodes well for the budget. We will not know the true impact of the week until the 2017 federal budget is released, but we are hopeful that some of our recommendations will be implemented.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Regards,

Blake Oliver
Vice-President (Education)
McMaster Students Union
INDIGENOUS STUDENTS – POST-SECONDARY STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Last year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission published a report with ninety-four calls to action. Many of these were related specifically to post-secondary education in the country. Apart from educating non-Indigenous students about the historical knowledge that perpetuates racism and ignorance in our society, the Commission also highlighted the need for our education system to be highly accessible for Indigenous peoples in Canada. These recommendations seek to outline changes that could increase access for Indigenous students across the country.

RECOMMENDATION: The federal government must remove the funding cap from the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.

The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) supports Indigenous students who are attending post-secondary education. The program was implemented to promote access to post-secondary education for Indigenous peoples, and has been extremely successful for its beneficiaries. In 1996 however, the government imposed a 2% growth cap on the program, limiting the amount of Indigenous people who are able to utilize the program and ultimately restricting access to education from members of Canada’s Indigenous population. The 2012 Chiefs Assembly on Education found that the funding shortage existing as a result of the cap created an attainment gap of almost 20% amongst Indigenous persons aged 15 and older when compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts.1

During the 2015 Federal Election the Liberal Party of Canada committed to investing $50 million in additional annual funding to the PSSSP.2 Despite this promise, the Liberal government failed to include this priority in their first budget, continuing the twenty-year legacy of underfunding the PSSSP. In addition, in a Supreme Court ruling in April of 2016, the court unanimously moved that all non-status first nations’ peoples are considered “Indians” in the definition of the 1867 Canadian. As a result negotiations are currently being initiated with various non-status groups to determine extensions of social benefits currently offered to recognised first nations groups. A key part of these discussions must be the extension of post-secondary financial aid currently offered only to First Nations and Inuit peoples. With this extension in mind, an investment is absolutely necessary.

A report from the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) shows that removing the 2% funding cap on the PSSSP will benefit not only Canada’s Indigenous population, but the Canadian economy as a whole as the reduction of the educational attainment gap would result in a net revenue of $116 Billion due to increased Tax Revenue.3 The Federal government should fulfill the promise made in the 2015 federal election, and remove the funding cap from the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, barriers within Canada’s education system have been removed, resulting in an increase in students with disabilities accessing post-secondary education. While this has been a largely positive step, students with disabilities face unique barriers to accessing post-secondary that must be addressed. While these barriers may exist in many forms (informational, physical, etc.) these recommendations are solely around the financial barriers that exist for students with disabilities in Canada’s system of post-secondary education. Students with disabilities incur highest costs on average to attend post-secondary due to costs of assistive devices, healthcare, and medication. In a survey conducted by the Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance in 2015, 47% of students with a disability in Ontario said that they were very concerned about having enough money to complete their education. Although some of these financial barriers faced by students with disabilities can be mended via the provincial level, these recommendations focus on how students are affected by the Canada Student Grants program and its associated programs.

RECOMMENDATION: The federal government should widen eligibility criteria for the Canada Student Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities, as well as the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities, to include students with temporary disabilities.

Currently as it stands, students with disabilities in Ontario can obtain funding for education at the provincial or federal level. Funding from the federal level comes from the Canada Student Grants program in the form of the Canada Student Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities and the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities. Funding at the provincial level in Ontario would come from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) through the Bursary for Students with Disabilities. Under the Canada Student Grants program, students may only apply if they have a permanent disability, whereas under OSAP students may apply if their disability is temporary or permanent. Within OSAP, the funding for students with disabilities comes from the Bursary for Students with Disabilities (up to $2000 per academic year). This is compared to the limit of $8000 per academic year for students with disabilities provided by the Canada Students Grants programs. This created a large gap in funding offered to students with temporary disabilities versus students with permanent disabilities. Students believe this is inequitable and creates a larger burden for students with temporary disabilities, who often incur similar costs to students with permanent disabilities.

RECOMMENDATION: The loan forgiveness benefits and repayment assistance plans offered for students should be extended to include students with temporary disabilities.

In addition to creating a more equitable funding system for students with disabilities, issues have been brought up regarding loan forgiveness and the effectiveness of the repayment assistance plan for students with disabilities. At the federal level, you can apply for loan forgiveness only through the Severe Permanent Disability Benefit. This benefit allows for debts to be cancelled if the student exhibits a severe permanent disability that “prevents a borrower from performing the daily activities necessary to participate in studies at a post-secondary school level and in the labour force; and is expected to remain with the person for their expected life”. Furthermore, the Repayment Assistance Plan is only...
available to individuals who have provided evidence of a permanent disability. Given that temporary disabilities can just as equally impair an individual’s ability to participate in the workforce, benefits for debt forgiveness and the repayment assistance plan should be further extended to these students.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The federal government should reimburse the full cost of the mandatory diagnostic assessment for students with disabilities over the age of 18.

Students with psychological, mental, or learning disabilities are required to be registered with a formal diagnostic assessment in order to receive accommodations at their institution through their Office for Students with Disabilities (OSDs). Before the age of 18, many provinces fully cover this diagnostic assessment via provincial health insurance. However, after the age of 18, the individual must complete a final diagnostic assessment, not covered by provincial health insurance. While the Canada Student Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities reimburses a maximum of $1,200 for these diagnostic assessments, most diagnostic assessments cost between $2,400 and $2,800. This creates a burden of over $1,200 to students accessing accommodations at their institution, which is a human right.
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IMMIGRATION

INTRODUCTION
During their studies, international students contribute billions to their provincial economies. In Ontario alone, international students contributed $2.9 billion to the provincial economy, and created approximately 30,000 jobs.1 Upon graduation, international students who wish to stay within Canada are forced to navigate a complicated immigration system and compete with skilled workers from all across the globe who are also applying, lessening the chance that they will be deemed eligible to apply for residency.

RECOMMENDATION: The federal government should amend the Express Entry program and separate international student applications from other applications.

The Express Entry program was introduced in 2015 by the Conservative Government as a means to assist in the transition of skilled foreign individuals into permanent Canadian residents. Express Entry is an online program that allows applicants to create an online profile when working to gain permanent citizenship within Canada. Once a profile is completed, and the government decides that the candidate is eligible to immigrate under the Federal Skilled Worker Program, the Federal Skilled Trades Program, or the Canadian Experience Class program, candidates are placed in a pool with all other eligible candidates, and are ranked alongside them. Only top candidates will receive an invitation to apply.

Originally implemented to simplify the immigration process, Express Entry has received criticism from students due to the policy placing international students in direct competition with other skilled workers.2 Since taking office, the Liberal Government has commented on the program, stating that “students had been shortchanged” by Express entry, and that the government needs to do more to attract them Canada and work on easing the process towards permanent citizenship.3 Amit Chakma, the president of Western University and chair of the federal government’s Advisory Panel of Canada’s International Education Strategy said that changes to the program would be steps in the correct direction, as the Advisory Panel recommended that Canada double its number of international students in order to effectively build Canada’s future prosperity.4

The Federal Government should amend the Express Entry program, separating students from other applicants. International students choose to study in Canada, and gain valuable skills while they are at our institutions. Additionally, while they study within Canada they contribute billions to their respective economies, making a significant impact within their provinces. The Advisory Panel of Canada’s International Education Strategy has previously stated the importance of this group of students, and by alleviating the procedural barriers that these students face when applying for permanent citizenship, the government will increase the appeal in Canadian post-secondary institutions when international students are looking at countries to study.

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3 Ibid
4 Ibid