PRESIDENT’S PAGE

The McMaster Students Union

The federal government is not traditionally associated with the support and operation of post-secondary institutions. This is not an unfounded assumption – education is a provincial mandate, resulting from the separation of powers within the Constitution Act. Despite this, the federal government still plays a role in supporting certain key aspects of universities. This includes, but is not limited to, immigration, Indigenous support, research funding, student financial aid, and copyright law. Therefore, it is important that students actively engage in federal advocacy.

Provincially, we are lucky to be part of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. However, the MSU has not consistently stayed with an organization that represents students federally. This year, I decided to join the Undergraduates of Canadian Research-Intensive Universities (UCRU), an informal coalition of undergraduate student unions from some of the largest research-intensive universities across Canada. Along with McMaster, UCRU is comprised of prestigious schools, including University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, and McGill. This week, we are in Ottawa lobbying to the federal government on our priorities for the year.

Naturally, one of those priorities is research funding. As a research-intensive university, McMaster relies heavily on federal grants from the National Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). Nevertheless, across the country, undergraduate students struggle to receive access to paid research opportunities, often defaulting to their fourth-year thesis. To address this reality, we are asking SSHRC and CIHR to create an undergraduate student research award, similar to how NSERC operates one.

We are also advocating for Indigenous student support – another area in which the federal government is involved. The Post-Secondary Student Support Program, which allocates money to Indigenous bands and is distributed to students, is severely underfunded. There have been investments, yet the backlog is still in the hundreds of millions, due to annual funding increases capped at 2%. We are calling for a reform of this system, along with consultation of Indigenous student groups. On the same topic, we are asking the federal government to create a grant for institutions to implement reconciliation initiatives on their campuses. Provincial underfunding can sometimes leave little room for this important issue to be addressed, but the federal government can help alleviate this burden, especially at smaller schools.

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Our third priority relates to the reduction of barriers to permanent residency for international students. There exists an Express Entry program, where work and student experiences count towards points that ultimately lead to permanent resident status. However, co-op experience does not count towards this program, adding another barrier to the immigration process for international students. We are asking for this to be fixed.

Finally, we are requesting the elimination of the tuition tax credit, as it primarily benefits parents and high-income students. Instead, we want this money to be allocated to upfront grants in the Canada Student Grant program, modelled after the recent OSAP reforms.

Federal advocacy work is an exciting and important part of the MSU’s mandate, and I am excited to play a part in one of the most effective years yet. You can find out more about our current federal advocacy week and UCRU at msumcmaster.ca/ucru, and follow #UCRUontheHill.