

# ANSER ABBAS

For Vice President (Education)



**2015-16**

## Dear Members of the Assembly,

I'm excited. You should be excited. In fact, I'm excited for you. For some of you, this is the start of your second year as part of the Assembly; for many, it is your first time. Regardless, there is a fantastic road ahead for all of you. I began on the same road myself two years ago, and it has taken me through growth and learning, to where I am today – a humbled, honoured and excited candidate to be your next Vice President (Education) of the McMaster Students Union.

The world of advocacy is a weird but wonderful one, and it is the Vice President (Education)'s job to navigate that world in the best interests of McMaster students. It is a position that requires knowledge of how all the many moving parts within the university – departments, faculties, governing bodies and structures – fit together. It requires an understanding of the greater forces that play a role in determining what happens at this university and at others. It is a job that requires an appreciation of complexity, and just how much work goes into making anything happen where multiple competing interests and points of view are involved. *That's where I come in.*

Over my four years at McMaster and my two years on the SRA, I have learnt how to lead. I have learnt how to build projects from the ground up; how to manage teams; how to conduct research and write policy; how to negotiate and reach agreements with wildly different points of view. Much of this learning has come directly from my experiences with the MSU, and wanting to give back to the organization and help it be stronger is part of the reason I am running for this position. The other part has more to do with wanting to give back to the university that has been my home, and to the students who have been my extended family for the last few years. *One of my greatest joys has been being able to serve students as a representative;* how could I not jump at the chance to continue to serve students to the best of my abilities?

This is an exciting time for the McMaster Students Union. President-Elect Ehima Osazuwa has emphasized the importance of challenging ourselves, of pushing ourselves to be ambitious and to dream bigger – and then do it. That is what I have tried to do with my ideas in this platform. *I want an MSU that is not afraid to set precedents.* I want an MSU that is not afraid to dream big and ask for more for McMaster students, because McMaster students deserve nothing but the best educational experience. I want an MSU that builds on its strengths, and addresses its weaknesses. It is a vision that I believe is aligned with the President-Elect's, and I look forward to the chance to work with him in moving this union forward.

I believe that my experience, my leadership abilities and my vision make me the right person to be the MSU' Vice President (Education). *It is my hope that on April 12, you will find reason to believe that as well.*

Sincerely, and gratefully,

Anser Abbas

## MSU Experience

### SRA Member, Science 2013-2015

- Led the creation of Inertia, the McMaster science radio show on CFMU 93.3
- Co-authored OUSA International Students Policy Paper
- Brought forward changes to bylaw 3 to grant SRA Observer status to the McMaster Indigenous Students Community Alliance (MISCA)
- Suggested the idea for the MSU Emergency Bursary and helped in its development
- Contributed to the MSU international students survey (yet to be conducted)
- Created the MSU Bereavement Operating Policy, passed in March 2015
- Twice awarded Most Diplomatic SRA Member

### Member of Standing Committee on External Affairs, 2013-2015

- Revised the MSU Student Engagement and Retention Policy, and wrote the associated Maroon Paper
- Contributed to MSU University Sustainability Policy
- Performed research and analysis on candidates' platforms during Hamilton municipal election
- Authored an OUSA blog post on Financial Assistance

### Member of MSU Diversity Services working group on the Perspectives on Peace initiative, 2015

- Helped develop and plan Diversity Services' "Our Place in Peace" event

### Leadership Developer, CLAY Conference, 2014

- Acted as a mentor and session leader for a group of high school students
- Facilitated leadership development by conducting focused sessions and leading reflections

### Member of Standing Committee on Finance, 2013-2014

- Played a role in negotiations leading to the establishment of Bylaw 5's financial transparency section

### Member of Ad-Hoc Committee on Democratic Reform, 2013-2014

- Participated in conversations around reform on VP elections, general assembly, and SRA structure
- Conducted research on alternative models to assembly structure, focusing on diversity and inclusion
- Suggested the Inclusion Council model to be implemented in MSU governance

## Other Relevant Experience

Member of McMaster Institute for Innovation in Teaching and Learning's Social Justice, Inclusion and Critical Pedagogy Research Working Group, 2014-2015

- Helped develop key questions to guide MIETL's research in the area of social justice and inclusion

Member of Science 3M03 course that contributed to development of new Science 1A03 course

- Learnt and applied pedagogical concepts in developing trial modules for the course
- Developed knowledge of teaching and learning techniques, including content delivery and assessment
- Developed understanding of MIETL and the pedagogical research happening at the university

Residence Orientation Representative, Bates Residence, 2014

- Helped create a welcoming atmosphere for incoming first years in residence
- Worked with a team of 16 student leaders in adapting to quickly changing situations
- Helped plan and coordinate programming to enhance the Welcome Week experience
- Acted as a peer mentor and positive role model to students in residence

Concert Coordinator, Free The Children McMaster, 2013-2015

- Organized annual charity concerts; maintained relationships with artists and stake holders

President, Free The Children McMaster, 2013-2014

- Developed a unified branding strategy, including social media presence and logo design
- Updated constitution to introduce an application process for executive positions
- Led a team of eight executive members in planning fundraising and awareness events

Student Success Leader, Global Perspectives Living Learning Community, 2013-2014

- Worked with Community Advisors in developing programming to encourage students to be informed and aware global citizens

Community Advisor, Hedden Hall, 2012-2013

- Assisted students in dealing with emotional, social, and academic needs
- Identified and managed roommate conflicts
- Facilitated community engagement, personal growth, and academic success through programming
- Making students aware of residence and university rules and policies

Guest Registration Staff, Housing and Conference Services, 2011-2012

- Worked with Community Advisors to ensure the security of residence buildings, and create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for residents and their guests.

# Internal Advocacy

## TA Training

Improved training and support for McMaster's teaching assistants is a topic that has come up time and time again in MSU advocacy efforts, for both Board members and SRA members. This year, however, is going to be an ideal time for us to make progress on this front. CUPE 3906, the union representing McMaster teaching assistants as well as research assistants, postdoctoral fellows and sessional faculty, has Collective Agreements with the University that determine the working conditions and employer relationships for each unit of employees. The Collective Agreement addressing teaching assistants expires in 2016, meaning this is an ideal time for the MSU to bring student concerns forward and influence the results of contract negotiations in terms of adding improved training requirements. This includes not just teaching training, but also training in how to deal with a diverse student population – including areas such as mental health, anti-oppression and disability awareness. With a new spirit of collaboration, I aim to work with both CUPE 3906 and the University in making sure these issues are addressed in the next Collective Agreement.

## Learning Portfolio Review

In 2013, McMaster launched the Learning Portfolio, an online tool for student reflection on both curricular and extracurricular learning experiences. However, despite being implemented in an increasing number of courses, students continue to voice frustration and ambivalence towards the Learning Portfolio. Although reflection is important and has been shown to improve learning, many students find the Learning Portfolio difficult to use, or don't see the point in using this. With an investment in the range of \$530,000 going into the Learning Portfolio, it is imperative that we take a critical eye to the tool, assess its value, and determine a better direction for it. Work has already begun on this, with this year's University Affairs Commissioner taking a lead on working with the McMaster Institute of Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (MIETL) as well as Desire2Learn (the company behind both Avenue to Learn and the Learning Portfolio) to suggest and implement improvements. I plan to carry this process forward and continue to push for tangible improvements that improve the usability and value of the Learning Portfolio.

## Monitoring Mosaic Rollout

In March 2015, the University launched the Mosaic course registration system, the long-awaited replacement for MUGSI and SOLAR. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the Mosaic project team, student reception to the system has been less than promising. It remains to be seen if this reception is a result of a transition to a new and unfamiliar interface, or whether there are problems in the fundamentals of Mosaic itself. It will fall on the Vice President Education to oversee what changes need to be made, and to ensure that the student voice is heard during the implementation of these changes.

# Internal Advocacy

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## Education Forum

Earlier this year McMaster and the Hamilton community came together to run Change Camp, an open conference event with round table discussions regarding issues of community engagement. It brought together both students and people from the city of Hamilton to talk about issues relevant to students, such as employment, transit, and municipal political engagement. However, Change Camp was focused externally, and dealt solely with community engagement. I want to replicate the flexible style of this event but focus it internally: a McMaster Change Camp, or Education Forum. *I want to bring together faculty, university administration, and most importantly students to talk about education topics* such as class sizes, the use of iClickers, and podcasts – and these are just a few of the possibilities. This will create a direct avenue for students to voice their concerns to decision makers at the university, and will influence pedagogical changes at McMaster.

## Continuing Accessibility Forum

Currently, McMaster has a chance to become a leader in university accessibility within this province. This year's MSU Accessibility Forum was the first event of its kind at this university, and provided an unprecedented avenue for students with disabilities to voice their concerns around accessibility. It led to a proposal for a new MSU Abilities service, as well as providing valuable groundwork for the MSU Accessibility Policy. *I am committed to making Accessibility Forum an annual mainstay, and building on its success in advocating for university accessibility both physical and otherwise.*

## Assessment Ban Awareness Campaign

McMaster's Assessment Ban applies to the last five days of classes plus any days between that and the examination period. During this time, assignments worth more than 10% of the final course grade cannot be assigned, tests and exams cannot be scheduled and take home exams worth more than 10% of the final course grade cannot be due. However, this set of regulations is not always followed in courses. In accordance with the recommendations of the recently passed MSU Examination and Term Work Scheduling Policy, I want to run an awareness campaign about the Assessment Ban in both academic terms, and provide means for students to report when course instructors circumvent the ban. Students should know what their rights are, and when they're being ignored – and they should have the power to do something about it.

## Exploring the Advocacy Potential in FYC and IRC

After a well-publicized and scrutinized hiatus this year, the Inter-Residence Council is currently undergoing restructuring. The incoming president of the IRC has emphasized that the organization will move in a direction that emphasizes advocacy and student opportunities. This provides the MSU with a chance to start a renewed collaboration in student advocacy with the IRC. There is great potential here – working with the IRC will provide opportunities to better engage first-year as well as upper-year students in residence. Another way the MSU can improve its engagement with first years is through the First Year Council. FYC also has great potential but needs to be critically examined. Helping provide FYC with a sense of direction will help the MSU's advocacy efforts by making first year students' issues and concerns clearer and louder.

# Policy Areas

A key strength of the MSU is our excellent bank of policy papers on a wide array of topics. Policy papers contain our stances and recommendations on key issues, backed by rigorous research and data and the symbolic weight of being approved by representatives of the entire undergraduate student body. There are two areas in which MSU policy is currently lacking, and these represent sects of the student body who I believe are currently underserved by the MSU:

## International Students

McMaster has committed to increasing the number of international students on campus in upcoming years as part of its Strategic Mandate Agreement with the province of Ontario. Last year I was fortunate enough to work on the OUSA policy on international students, and during the writing process I realized how much more our student union can do for international students. With the number of international students set to increase, there will only be more and more that the MSU will need to do to address the needs of this sector of the student population. The first step to achieving this is for the MSU to establish a standing policy paper on international students. Having worked on this issue both last year and this year, I am incredibly excited to see this policy written, and using it as a springboard to advocate for more support for international students.

## Trans\* Students

This year the Women and Gender Equity Network started work on a trans\* students policy paper. There is, however, still work to be done to see this policy to completion. With OUSA passing its first LGBTQ+ policy paper in March (on this campus!), there is a substantial amount of momentum behind advocacy on trans\* issues which we must build on. Mr. Osazuwa made the implementation of gender neutral bathrooms a focus of his platform, and this is just one of many issues that we will be able to advocate for once we have established a strong policy paper on trans\* student issues. The MSU's job is to represent all of its students, and this means paying particular attention to students who need additional support. Unfortunately, this too often includes trans\* students.

# Municipal Advocacy

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## Building Strong Relationships with City Council

The MSU has enjoyed increasingly positive relationships with various departments and decision-makers in the city in recent years. However, Hamilton recently had a municipal election, and thus this is an excellent time to renew our relationships and establish new ones. Building a strong relationship with councillors and city staff allows the MSU a direct way to influence municipal decision-making and further students' interests within Hamilton.

## Increased Presence at City Council

An effective direct way of making the McMaster student voice heard at within the city is to voice concerns in the form of delegations, presentations and a physically increased presence at City Hall itself. We directly saw the results this could have earlier this year when Mr. Brodka and Mr. Narro Perez presented to city council on transit, and I would love to see more of it.

## Municipal Budget Submission

For the past couple of years, the MSU has done a pre-budget submission to the provincial government outlining recommendations for the province's post-secondary education spending. While the municipal government does not provide funding directly to education at McMaster, they do determine spending in areas such as employment, transit, entrepreneurship, arts and culture, and the environment – all topics that, according to continued research, are important to students. Making a formal budget submission to the municipal government will signal the MSU's position as a stakeholder in the city, and potentially influence the city's spending in ways that better McMaster students' engagement and experience within Hamilton.

## Continuing Relationship with Chamber of Commerce

For the past few years, the MSU has been a paying member of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. This advisory body plays a key role in the city's decisions on where and what jobs are created, which is increasingly important as graduates and current students become concerned about what career opportunities are available to them. I plan to ensure MSU representation on talent development and employment development taskforces, as well as making sure students' concerns are heard when Hamilton's 2015-2020 Economic Action Plan is developed.

The MSU has long enjoyed a positive and productive relationship with our provincial lobbying organization, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). This relationship must be continued and built upon. I am, however, committed to taking a critical view of OUSA to ensure the organization is being as relevant and transparent in its lobbying efforts as possible. My key priorities in working with OUSA this year are:

## Addressing Tuition Framework

In 2013, the Ontario government established a tuition framework that limited university tuition increases to a maximum of 3% per year. With this framework set to expire in 2017, and with Mr. Osazuwa's emphasis on tuition advocacy, *now is the time for exploring what kind of protocol will replace the current one.* It will be important to advocate for a system that is fair to students, and addresses the fact that McMaster is one of an increasing number of Ontario universities that are now deriving more revenue from rising tuition than from provincial operating grants.

## Authoring on Financial Aid Paper

Financial aid is a personal area of great interest for me, having contributed to the creation of the MSU Emergency Bursary program as well as writing an OUSA blog analyzing the financial aid availability at McMaster (which may or may not be published at the time of this package being read). OUSA's policy papers are reviewed and updated routinely, and the OUSA policy on financial aid is one of those being updated at the 2015 Fall General Assembly. Traditionally, VP (Education) equivalents from the various OUSA member schools each take on one policy to co-author during the writing process. I believe my strengths would be best served by contributing to the financial aid policy paper, hopefully encouraging McMaster and other universities as well as the provincial government to improve the accessibility and availability of need-based financial aid.

## Ensuring McMaster Representation on Students with Disabilities Paper

During the 2016 Spring OUSA General Assembly, the policy paper on Students With Disabilities will be updated. Keeping in line with my vision of seeing McMaster be a university leader in university accessibility, it is important that McMaster students have a say in the writing of the updated Students With Disabilities policy.

This year the SRA made an important federal advocacy decision in voting to leave the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA). This does not mean federal advocacy is not important; the federal government plays an important role in developing educational policy for international students and Aboriginal students, and it is important for the MSU, and important to me personally, to stand for these students. As well, the federal government funds 60% of OSAP aid – and with over 60% of McMaster students receiving OSAP, federal advocacy thus becomes important to all McMaster students. The future of McMaster’s federal advocacy is full of possibilities, and I am excited to explore these. My priorities in federal advocacy for next year are:

## Federal Elections

The next federal election is currently scheduled for October 19, 2015. During the provincial election last summer, the riding of Ancaster–Dundas–Flamborough–Westdale saw some of the highest voter turnouts across Ontario. It is my goal to build on this success during the federal election. This will involve running a top-notch election awareness campaign that makes election issues relevant to students, and makes the process of voting easier to understand. With three polling stations to be located on campus, and a strong Advocacy Street Team that has recently run two similar election campaigns, I have no doubt McMaster will get out the vote successfully.

## Exploring Local Federal Advocacy

With the loss of CASA affiliation, the MSU no longer enjoys the same network of connections at Parliament Hill. It will be the job of the incoming VP (Education) to determine a future for the MSU’s federal advocacy. The first step we can take is establish a relationship and communicate our priorities with the incoming Member of Parliament for McMaster’s riding. Maintaining contact with CASA as observers is important as well; the MSU must keep a close eye on developments within CASA to see if rejoining the organization will be a feasible option in the near future.

# Personal Goals

## SRA Working Groups

Often SRA members get elected on priorities and projects that may not fit under the umbrella of a specific Standing Committee. Projects like these then often get left by the wayside. Commissioners and Committees have many projects they take on – it is only logical that not every single idea can be incorporated. However, SRA members should be able to take the lead on such ideas without having to count on a Committee to take them on. *I want to enable this by setting up SRA Working Groups, small informal groups of like-minded SRA members who can work on projects that do not fall under a committee's jurisdiction.* A BOD member would be in charge of providing basic resources and guidance on how to complete projects, but these groups would be independent otherwise. Working Groups would not have the same reporting requirements or formalized structure of Standing Committees – it would simply be a dynamic and flexible way of getting work done. While structure is important, my goal with this project is to prioritize work and results over structure.

## Revamping SRA Training

A topic that comes up again and again when talking about SRA productivity is the fact that often SRA members don't get started on projects halfway through their terms, simply because it takes that long to get organized and figure out priorities and action plans. One way of changing this is providing more information and training at the onset of SRA terms, so that SRA members are better equipped to take the reins on their projects as soon as possible. To this end, *I want to add more advocacy-specific training sessions to SRA training weekend in June,* so that SRA members have a better understanding of how university processes and advocacy work before the school year even starts.

## Empowering commissioners

The Vice President (Education)'s portfolio is often considered the largest amongst the Vice Presidents; in fact, many student unions of universities comparable to McMaster in size have divided the portfolio into two positions. The MSU does not have that – but what we do have are the External Affairs and University Affairs Commissioners, two positions that provide immense support to the Vice President. *I believe the Commissioners can be better supports to the Vice President by increasing their authority and their responsibilities.* The External Affairs Commissioner, for example, should be able to communicate with MPs and City employees on the behalf of the MSU, rather than having only the VP (Education) handle those communications. Along with adding responsibility to these roles, I would also like to explore how these positions can be better compensated for the often disproportionate amount of work they do for the organization.