

# NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CAUCUS

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUDGET 2012



# NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CAUCUS

The National Aboriginal Caucus (NAC) is the voice for Aboriginal students in Canada. NAC unites Aboriginal students across the country. With members at campuses from St. John's to Victoria, the National Aboriginal Caucus puts the issues of Aboriginal students on the national agenda.

Aboriginal students also join together to lobby on issues of concern to all students such as student debt, tuition fees, and core funding for Canadian universities and colleges. The priorities of the Caucus are set by its membership and defined by the daily challenges facing Aboriginal students.

## **Goals**

The National Aboriginal Caucus has the following objectives: advocating for the interests of all Aboriginal students at the national and international levels and providing a forum for discussion on issues of concern to Aboriginal students.

## **Advocacy for Aboriginal Students**

The Aboriginal Caucus plays a critical role in raising Aboriginal students' issues within the provincial and federal landscape.

The Aboriginal Caucus monitors legislative developments as they pertain to Aboriginal students. The research and communications capacity of the Caucus also ensures that the voice of Aboriginal students is heard on such issues as funding, student financial assistance, and governance.

## **Mission Statement**

The National Aboriginal Caucus mission is to see the removal of all barriers that Aboriginal students face when pursuing post-secondary education. The Caucus will achieve this through lobbying federal, provincial and municipal governments, through the development of strong and concise campaigns, and through working together with similar organisations and coalition partners toward high-quality, accessible post-secondary education.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canadians have long seen post-secondary education as a way to improve their standard of living and develop a more equitable society. While the educational attainment of the Canadian population has been steadily increasing since the 1950's, Aboriginal peoples' participation has not risen to comparable levels. A lack of necessary resources and support to pursue post-secondary education is one of many barriers that have prevented Canada's Aboriginal peoples' from achieving socioeconomic equality with other Canadians.

In order to fulfill its treaty obligations and address the needs of Canada's fastest-growing population, the federal government must ensure that every eligible Aboriginal student is provided with adequate funding to attend post-secondary education institutions. Doing so is critical to maintain the strength of Canada's economy in the decades ahead.

This brief outlines recommendations for the federal government's role in providing post-secondary education to Aboriginal learners in five sections:

Section I	Education is a treaty, an inherent, and a human right
Section II	Access to Post-Secondary Education
Section III	Post-Secondary Student Support Program
Section IV	Non-Status First Nations and Métis
Section V	Support for Aboriginal-Controlled Institutions

## **The National Aboriginal Caucus recommends that:**

- 1. The federal government remove the funding cap on the Post-Secondary Student Support Program and ensure that the Program receives sufficient funding such that every eligible First Nations and Inuit learner is provided adequate support to attend post-secondary education institutions; and*
- 2. The federal government, in cooperation with Aboriginal organisations, develop a plan to extend non-repayable student financial assistance to Métis and Non-Status First Nations; and*
- 3. The federal government should continue to support Aboriginal controlled education by increasing long-term, sustainable core funding for Aboriginal-controlled institutions.*

## **BACKGROUND**

During the last half-century, the challenges faced by Aboriginal students have been the subject of a vast amount of government and non-governmental organization research. By 2002, it is estimated that over 6,000 reports on First Nations education had been tabled before governments and since then, several thousand additional reports have been issued.

Of particular note, the multi-party Parliamentary Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development tabled a report entitled “No Higher Priority: Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada” in 2007. The report outlined ten recommendations for improving access for Aboriginal peoples, including increasing funding for the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) and extending eligibility to non-status First Nations and Métis students.

Unfortunately, the report has not led to action. Instead of acknowledging barriers to post-secondary education unique to Aboriginal peoples, the federal government’s response to the report was to continue to ignore its responsibilities. The government has offloaded its responsibilities to Aboriginal students and their families by continuing to allow tuition fees to increase and programs to remain underfunded.

## **I. EDUCATION IS A TREATY, AN INHERENT, AND A HUMAN RIGHT**

### **The Federal Government’s Legal Responsibility**

The formation of the state of Canada, both historically and legally, is based on treaties between Aboriginal peoples and colonial European nations. To this day, all Canadians remain an active party to treaties and are bound by their established rights and responsibilities.

The rights of Aboriginal peoples were first asserted in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which stated that use of Aboriginal land was to be negotiated with Aboriginal nations and could only be acquired by treaty or purchase by the Crown. Among other commitments, Aboriginal peoples were to be provided an education in exchange for the use of their land and natural resources.

Responsibility for providing this education was assumed by the federal government under the British North America Act of 1867. However, until the 1940s, First Nations peoples had to give up their status and rights as a “registered Indian” in order to attend a post-secondary institution.

The establishment of education as a treaty right was reaffirmed in treaties signed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Further, section 35 of the 1982 Canadian Constitution recognizes and affirms the treaty rights and inherent rights of Aboriginal peoples. In order for the federal government to continue enjoying the rights it gained from signed treaties, it must also live up to its responsibilities and recognize education as a treaty right, an inherent right, and a human right.

### **Canada’s disastrous track record on Aboriginal education**

While the government has failed to devote adequate resources to support the participation of Aboriginal peoples in college or university, it has a history of devoting substantial resources to assimilate Aboriginal peoples. In 1891, the Government of Canada instituted mandatory attendance in residential schools for all Aboriginal youth. In these schools children were prohibited from speaking Aboriginal languages and practicing Aboriginal culture. All told, roughly 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were removed from their communities and placed in schools where physical, verbal, sexual, and emotional abuse was rampant.

On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister took a historic step by apologizing to Canada’s Aboriginal peoples for the terror of the residential school system. On behalf of the government, he acknowledged that the residential school system was intended to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, and culture, and assimilate them into European culture. The humiliation and trauma experienced in residential schools has led to many of the problems facing Aboriginal communities today. In many regions Aboriginal youth are barely a generation removed from residential schools.

While a formal apology was a crucial step for the government to take, albeit symbolic, the government has been slow to take concrete action to rectify the wrongs of the past. In 2004, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada commissioned a report titled, "Measuring Well-Being of Aboriginal People". The report found that if the Aboriginal population was itself a country, it would rank 32<sup>nd</sup> on the U.N. Human Development Index. This is in stark contrast to Canada, which typically ranks in the top ten.

## **II. ACCESS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION**

Educational attainment levels among Aboriginal peoples remain significantly lower than the non-Aboriginal population. Aboriginal peoples over the age of 25 are more than twice as likely as the non-Aboriginal population to have not graduated high school (34% to 14%) and are only a third as likely to have obtained a university degree (8% to 23%).

The gap in post-secondary participation can be attributed to significant and complex barriers that Aboriginal students face on the path to higher education. Research has found that Aboriginal students are largely debt-averse and are more reluctant to access loan-based programs if they are in financial need. They are often mature students who are more likely to have dependents and face higher costs such as childcare and relocation. Additionally, approximately 20 percent of the First Nations population is unemployed, a rate that increases to 41 percent in the 15-24 age group. This severely limits access to financial resources for families to pay for the rising costs of college or university.

Canada's Aboriginal population is growing at six times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population. According to the last census, over one million people, or roughly four percent of Canada's population, identified as Aboriginal. Of these, 48 percent were under the age of 24. It is estimated that over 300,000 Aboriginal youth could enter the labour force in the next 15 years alone.

Though Aboriginal peoples' are the fastest growing demographic in Canada and the government's responsibility to ensure access to education for Aboriginal peoples, funding for Aboriginal education has remained stagnant for

more than a decade. In May 2009, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards reported that closing the educational gap would lead to an additional \$179 billion in GDP growth over the next 20 years.

### **Tuition Fees**

Lack of financial resources has left Aboriginal students particularly vulnerable to tuition and ancillary fee increases. While increases in funding for the PSSSP have been capped at two percent per year, tuition fees have more than doubled since the introduction of the cap only 15 years ago. For thousands of non-status First Nations and Métis students, the scarcity of education funding makes financial barriers to post-secondary education almost insurmountable.

## **III. POST-SECONDARY STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM**

Currently, the federal government provides student financial assistance to status First Nations and Inuit students through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)'s PSSSP issues approximately \$300 million in non-repayable financial aid to roughly 23,000 Status First Nations and Inuit students each year.

The purpose of the PSSSP is to improve access to post-secondary education and alleviate financial barriers by covering basic costs of tuition fees, books, supplies, travel, and living expenses. In 2008-09, on average, eligible students received approximately \$13,273 per year, roughly two-thirds the estimated cost per year of an undergraduate degree, which stood at \$19,580. The current level of funding does not meet the needs of First Nations and Inuit students.

Prior to 1992, funding to the PSSSP was determined based on the number of eligible students and the level of their anticipated expenses. In 1992, INAC replaced the per-student funding model with a system of block budgeting that would allow band councils to set their own priorities.

In 1996, increases in funding to the program were capped at two percent annually, regardless of growth in costs or increases in the Aboriginal population. Prior to the implementation of the funding cap, approximately 27,000 Aboriginal students were supported to attend college or university. In 2006, the number fell to just over 22,000.

While multiple audits of the PSSSP suggest there are serious problems with the program, the steep decline in the number of eligible students being funded over the past year is the direct result of the number of eligible recipients exceeding the program budget. The two percent cap has meant funding is unable to keep up with increasing living costs, inflation and tuition fee increases that average 3.6 percent a year.

Thus, lack of funding has forced Aboriginal communities who administer the funds to make difficult decisions about which prospective students receive funding each year. It is estimated that between 2001 and 2006, the two percent funding cap resulted in over 10,500 students being denied funding with an additional 2,588 denied in 2007-08 alone.

**RECOMMENDATION #1:**

*The federal government remove the funding cap on the Post-Secondary Student Support Program and ensure that the Program receives sufficient funding such that every eligible First Nations and Inuit learner is provided adequate support to attend post-secondary education institutions.*

## **IV. NON-STATUS FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS STUDENTS**

According to the 2006 census, 33% of the total Aboriginal population in Canada is Métis, the second largest Aboriginal population in the country.

Non-Status First Nations and Métis face similar socioeconomic conditions and face the same challenges in accessing post-secondary education as First Nations and Inuit peoples. On average, income levels remain lower than the general population, with Non-Status First Nations and Métis earning 75% of the average income of the total population.

At present, non-status First Nations and Métis students are not covered under the same federal policy as status First Nations and Inuit students. INAC's Post-Secondary Education Program is not available to these students, leaving many without the financial resources necessary to pursue post-secondary education.

**RECOMMENDATION #2:**

*The federal government should, in cooperation with Aboriginal organisations, develop a plan to extend non-repayable student financial assistance to Métis and Non-Status First Nations.*

## **V. SUPPORT FOR ABORIGINAL-CONTROLLED INSTITUTIONS**

Aboriginal peoples have educated their own communities since time immemorial. In 1969, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians released its first major education development, the Education Task Force. In 1973, then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, Jean Chrétien endorsed the National Indian Brotherhood education committee's statement on Indian Control of Indian Education.

Since that time, Aboriginal educators and leaders have developed and delivered courses and curricula in Aboriginal controlled institutes across the country that reflect the perspectives and foundations of their traditions and worldviews. These important changes have led to increased numbers of relevant educational institutes. Unique Indigenous methodologies are fostered that strengthen the identities of Aboriginal students and have dramatically improved opportunities for success - strengthening the confidence and self-determination of Aboriginal communities.

**RECOMMENDATION #3:**

*The federal government should continue to support Aboriginal controlled education by increasing long-term, sustainable core funding for Aboriginal-controlled institutions.*

# CONCLUSION

## Investing in Education Pays Off

The economic and social benefits of post-secondary education for Aboriginal communities greatly outweigh the costs of meeting the federal government's treaty responsibilities. Most Aboriginal students who are able to access funding through the PSSSP succeed in completing post-secondary studies and find meaningful work. The majority of Aboriginal students who graduate return to work in their communities and are employed in their field of study, achieving economic self-reliance and helping to develop healthy and stable communities.

Poverty in First Nations communities has led to a number of health and social problems such as higher incarceration rates, higher suicide rates, and higher incidences of tuberculosis and diabetes. The cost to government to fulfill its treaty responsibilities for Aboriginal education is minimal compared to the long-term implications of maintaining the status-quo. As long as the gap in education, employment, and income remains, Canada stands to lose between \$400 billion in cumulative GDP contribution and \$116 billion in social programme spending and lost tax revenues over the next 20 years.

There is no doubt that the current PSSSP program works for those who can access it. However, the federal government must lift the cap on increases in funding and move to a per-student funding model so that no willing and capable student is denied access to post-secondary education.

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