

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CAUCUS

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2015 BUDGET

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.

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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.

ACCESS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Remove the funding cap on increases to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program and ensure that every eligible First Nations, Inuit, and Métis learner is provided funding.

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 and are only a third as likely to have obtained a university degree.

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 higher costs such as childcare and relocation.

Canada's Aboriginal population is growing at six times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, over 1.4 million people, or roughly 4.3 percent of Canada's population, identified as Aboriginal. Of these, 46 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 federal government has a responsibility to ensure access to education for Aboriginal peoples, funding for Aboriginal education has remained stagnant for more than a decade.

Currently, the federal government provides student financial assistance to status First Nations and Inuit students through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) currently provides

approximately \$306 million in non-repayable financial aid to roughly 23,000 status First Nations and Inuit students each year.

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, AANDC replaced the per-student funding model with a system of block budgeting that would allow First Nations to set their own priorities. In 1996, increases in funding to the program were capped at 2 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.

A 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 2006 and 2011, the cap on funding increases resulted in over 18,500 students being denied funding.

According to the 2011 census, 32.3 percent 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. At present, non-status First Nations and Métis students are not covered under the same federal policy as status First Nations and Inuit students. AANDC's Post-Secondary Education Program is not available to these students, leaving many without the financial resources necessary to pursue post-secondary education.

The economic and social benefits of post-secondary education for Aboriginal communities greatly outweigh the costs of meeting the federal government's treaty responsibilities. The funding disbursed

through the PSSSP has a proven track record for those who can access it. Most Aboriginal students who are able to receive funding through the PSSSP succeed in completing their studies and go on to find meaningful work. Regardless of their place of residence, the majority of Aboriginal graduates return to work in their communities and are employed in their field of study, achieving economic self-reliance and help to develop healthy and stable communities while improving the Canadian economy.

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.

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Work with Indigenous women's organisations to establish a comprehensive and coordinated national action plan to end violence against Indigenous women, including a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Indigenous women and girls in Canada face homicide rates at least four times higher than rates faced by all other women. Between 1980 and 2012, 1,017 Indigenous women and girls were murdered. On top of this, there are over 164 unresolved cases of Indigenous women and girls who have been missing for 30 days or longer.

Pervasive violence against Indigenous women in Canada has long been treated as isolated cases. Despite the growing number of incidents of missing and murdered Indigenous women, a recent Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) report outlining the rates of violence faced by Indigenous women and girls, and the calls for action by Indigenous women's organisations, many of the solutions identified

by government commissions and inquiries have yet to be implemented.

In order to take steps to support vulnerable Canadians, create safer and more secure communities, and fulfill Canada's international human rights commitments, a national action plan is required to ensure Indigenous women have access to justice, including effective and unbiased police response to all cases of missing and murdered women and new investigations of cases where police misconduct has occurred; improved public awareness and accountability through the consistent collection and publication of national statistics on the rate of violent crime faced by Indigenous women; and adequate and stable funding to frontline organisations that provide services such as shelter, support and counseling for Indigenous women and girls in their communities. Addressing the root causes of violence against Indigenous women also requires eliminating the socio-economic gap, be it educational or otherwise, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

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