

BACKGROUND

An increasing number of students are facing issues related to mental health and wellbeing, and are in need of support. It is estimated that one in five Canadians will suffer from mental illness at some point in their lifetime, and the typical age of onset for many mental illnesses and mood disorders is 18-25.¹ These issues can be exacerbated in post-secondary environments by the fact that many students have just left home for the first time and so are away from their usual support systems, and that pursuing advanced education is often stressful.

Despite the number of students who require mental health services, most do not access treatment.² A study carried out in 2013 found that only 1 in 5 Canadian students who felt severely depressed in the last year had received any kind of treatment. While this is partially due to stigma surrounding mental illness, it can also be attributed to the fact that on-campus health centres and counseling departments are often understaffed. Wait times typically range from two to four weeks, and counseling centres often report a lack of staff as their largest challenge. A national survey of mental health services in post-secondary institutions in Canada carried out in 2016 found the range and depth of services to be “variable”.³ Most of the institutions surveyed also reported a difficulty in responding to the demands of students.

Dedicated funding from the provincial government would ensure that counseling centers are able to deal with



demand. Currently, funding for mental health services is drawn from institutional budgets, and so is subject to change from year to year depending on the programs and services that individual institutions prioritize. Access to healthcare is a right, and should not be contingent on the decisions made each year by an institution’s board of governors. Where you decide to study and

how much you happen to pay in student fees should not determine your access to counseling.

A similar initiative involving targeted mental health funding was approved this year in Alberta following a successful trial in 2016. Dedicated funding for mental health services would allow for consistent and equitable access to the care that so many students need.

RECOMMENDATION

That the government allocate \$40 million in targeted funding to post-secondary institutions for front-line mental health services on campus.

FOOTNOTES

¹ OUSA Health and Wellness Policy Paper https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ousa/pages/80/attachments/original/1473368840/Student_Health_and_Wellness_document.pdf?1473368840

² Ibid.

³ Mental Health Services for Students at Post-secondary Institutions: A National Survey <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0706743716640752>

BACKGROUND

The ABCS was pleased to see this in the ministerial mandate letter for advanced education, as this is a key way of improving British Columbia's universities. Graduate students are a driver of the emerging knowledge-driven economy in the province. Other provinces have comprehensive funding for graduate students, and if BC cannot compete with this then graduate students will be forced to live, work, and study elsewhere. The province should encourage excellence in BC's graduate school programs by introducing a new graduate student scholarship fund.

Graduate studies are a vital part of the post-secondary system. First-rate graduate students lead cutting-edge research initiatives, provide excellent learning experiences for undergraduates, and form the basis of a highly-skilled workforce. Through their research, they enhance our economy through innovation, and support our institutions by generating significant investment. Attracting the best graduate students means that universities also benefit from the best teaching assistants, sessional instructors, and peer educators.

The current inadequate funding, combined with a high cost of living in BC, creates a significant obstacle for potential and current graduate students to overcome. As a result, students choose to study and settle elsewhere and struggle to complete their degrees.

Other Canadian provinces such as Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta, have already recognized the benefits of recruiting top graduate students and currently offer provincial graduate scholarship programs. Students and universities in BC, as well as the BC Select Standing Committee on Finance



and Government Services, all agree that a similar program should be created in British Columbia.¹ It's time to put that program in place to attract the brightest minds to BC.

With other provinces out-competing British Columbia in graduate student scholarships, it is likely that the best graduate students will be compelled to move out of province, taking their innovation and private sector investments with them.

In order to ensure British Columbia remains competitive with other provinces in attracting the best and brightest graduate students, the ABCS is calling for a graduate student scholarship program, comparable to those of other provinces, to be instituted in British Columbia. This program would be an ongoing investment in our province, attracting and retaining highly qualified researchers and skilled workers while delivering the innovation needed to

RECOMMENDATION

That the government implement a graduate scholarship program that is competitive with other provinces at a cost of \$15 million.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Report on the 2015 Budget Consultations <https://www.leg.bc.ca/parliamentary-business/committees-reports/23#paper>



BACKGROUND

The August 1, 2017 reduction of student loan interest rates to the prime rate¹ demonstrates a welcome step towards accessible post-secondary education in British Columbia. However, the government's commitment to alleviating the financial burden on students in BC will take much more work. Obtaining student loans is the primary means of accessing post-secondary education for low and middle income students across the province. Students who must take out loans pay considerably more for their education than those who don't as a result of servicing interest.

According to the 2015 Canadian Uni-

versity Survey Consortium, the average debt for a Canadian student is \$26,819.² This estimate is even higher for B.C. students, who graduate a four-year program with an average of \$35,000 in debt.³ These figures highlight the overwhelming barriers faced by students pursuing post-secondary education. Students in BC should be able to access all forms of education regardless of their financial position. Student loan interest is one of the major barriers in creating accessible education in BC.

The average cost of a four-year degree in Canada is \$25,492⁴, and the average student debt among those who take

out loans is \$27,000.⁵ Using the current interest rates, the average student who must take out loans will pay \$7,365.23 in interest payments alone.⁶ This means that servicing interest on a student loan costs more than paying for an additional year of full time education.

According to the July 18, 2017 government mandate, the BC government is committed to reducing the financial burden of BC students by eliminating interest on provincial government student loans: "As part of government's commitment to making life more affordable by phasing out interest on BC student loans."⁷

RECOMMENDATION

That the government stop collecting interest on BC government student loans.

FOOTNOTES

¹ <https://studentaidbc.ca/news/loans/provincial-student-loan-interest-rate-reduction>

² http://www.cusc-ccreu.ca/CUSC_2015_Graduating_Master%20Report_English.pdf,p.36

³ <http://www.fpse.ca/news/presidents-comment/bc-budget-201>

⁴ Statistics Canada. Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study

⁵ <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=4770077&pattern=&stByVal=1&p1=1&p2=37&tabMode=dataTable&csid=>

⁶ 13 ways to Modernize Youth Employment in Canada: Strategies for a new world of Work <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/youth-expert-panel/report-modern-strategies-youth-employment.html>

⁷ Student aid BC loan repayment calculator <https://studentaidbc.ca/plan/debt>

⁸ <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/premier-cabinet-mlas/minister-letter/mark-mandate.pdf,p.3>



BACKGROUND

Removing unnecessary rules that prevent universities and colleges from building affordable student housing could result in thousands of units of affordable housing across the province. The demand for on-campus housing in BC is growing year by year. Waitlists for residences on campus have reached historic highs and the off-campus low-cost rental market is overcrowded and increasingly unaffordable. Rent is increasing steadily and vacancy rates have remained dangerously low across the province.

Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in BC currently face barriers to taking on debt to build on-campus housing. This is prohibi-

tive for most institutions who do not have the option of leveraging endowments to fund residence buildings. While debt limitations on public bodies are important for ensuring public institutions do not take on risky ventures, the debt incurred building residences would be fully serviced through collection of residence fees. Given the long waitlists that exist, this is some of the safest debt in the province.

Ensuring that students in on campus housing are afforded the same rights as tenants everywhere else in the province is also crucial. Institutionally managed student housing is currently not regulated by provincial law. The Residential Tenancy

Act does not apply to “living accommodation owned or operated by an educational institution and provided by that institution to its students or employees”. Student housing must be subject to regulations that offer students protections in line with the residential tenancy act, in a way that allows for the unique circumstances of on-campus housing.

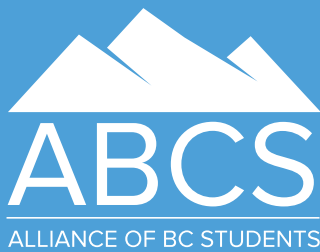
A recent business case analysis by the Alliance of BC Students determined that post-secondary institutions have the capacity to build over 23,000 student housing spaces in British Columbia, with over 13,000 of those located in Metro Vancouver.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the government enable post-secondary institutions to take on debt for purposes of student housing and encourage the start of housing development through an \$18 million annual fund for post-secondary institutions to access.

That the government mandate that all post-secondary institutions develop housing strategies for their students.

That the government ensure that students are afforded the same tenancy rights as any other tenant in British Columbia.



FREE EDUCATION FOR LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME STUDENTS

Ensuring fairness of opportunity in British Columbia

BACKGROUND

The initial cost of education is consistently given as one of the primary barriers to education for those from lower incomes. While post-program support in the form of debt forgiveness and low interest rates are important for those who are struggling with repaying loans, students are often unaware of these programs prior to entering post-secondary programs. Up front, needs-based grants at the point of enrolment increase accessibility for those who need it most.

British Columbia remains the sole province without a needs-based grants program. The Canada Student Grants Program, administered by the federal government, serves to complement provincial grant programs, however, in British Columbia, it serves as the only comprehensive needs based grants program available to post-secondary students. Providing free education for low and middle income students will assist in reducing barriers to accessing post-secondary education, and increase completion rates.

There is a clear link between increasing debt levels and lower program completion rates. Low program completion rates remove much of the benefit to the individual, as well as society, of investing in post-secondary education. Reducing debt levels through needs based grants will improve program completion rates, and result in higher value for the investment in post-secondary education.



RECOMMENDATION

That the government introduce a comprehensive needs-based grants system for post-secondary students in British Columbia that matches the Canada Student Grants program for low- and middle- income students, at a cost of \$97 million.