

Innovating Accessibility and Affordability:

A Student Vision for Nova Scotia's Post-Secondary System

students The logo for Nova Scotia, consisting of the letters 'NS' in a stylized, blocky font. The 'N' is blue and the 'S' is yellow, both contained within a blue circular background.

Student Advocacy Week

November 5-9, 2018

Overview

About Students Nova Scotia (StudentsNS)

StudentsNS is a nonprofit and nonpartisan alliance of Nova Scotia post-secondary student associations. We give 20,000 students a united voice in Nova Scotia, helping set the direction of post-secondary education by researching challenges, identifying solutions, and bringing student recommendations directly to government.



About Student Advocacy Week

Student Advocacy Week is an annual conference where student leaders from across the province join together to meet with MLA's, stakeholders, and other decision makers. The following are our recommendations to improve the accessibility, affordability, quality, and role of the student voice in our post-secondary education system.

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Modernizing Student Financial Aid

One of the four core values of StudentsNS is affordability. We believe that the cost of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia should not cause undue hardship upon any student, restrict their ability to pursue whatever career they choose, or make them financially unable to live in the community of their choice. **Post-Secondary education in Nova Scotia is expensive, as our students have the second highest tuition and experience the largest annual tuition increases in Canadaⁱ.** As universities across our province struggle with enrolment challenges, it is clear we need to do more to help students from lower socio-economic backgrounds participate in post-secondary education.

Recommendation #1: Developing a Targeted Free Tuition Program

Targeted free tuition (TFT) is an innovative development in Canadian student financial aid that has been implemented in Ontario and New Brunswick. Through needs-based, upfront, non-repayable grants, it allows financial aid systems to provide “free” tuition in the form of a grant to students from the lowest income backgrounds. Ontario and New Brunswick use a sliding scale through the student aid application to determine grant amounts. This results in students from the lowest income backgrounds receiving “free” tuition, while students with less financial need still receive increased upfront grants.

Implementing a Targeted Free Tuition Program within Nova Scotia Student Assistance would provide “free” tuition for students with the most need and result in an average of \$3500 in increased grants for approximately 6500 university and 2000 NSCC students from lower income backgroundsⁱⁱ.

Targeted Free Tuition Sliding Scale Demonstration					
Family Income	≤ \$50,000	≤ \$70,000	≤ \$90,000	≤ \$110,000	≤ \$130,000
“Free” Tuition Grant Amount	100% of program tuition	80% of program tuition	60% of program tuition	40% of program tuition	20% of program tuition
	Max \$10,000	Max \$8,000	Max \$6,000	Max \$4,000	Max \$2,000

This program would also greatly reduce the large upfront sticker price that deters many prospective students from attending post-secondary education, likely resulting in both increased enrolments in post-secondary and applications for student financial.

The cost of a Targeted Free Tuition Program in Nova Scotia would be approximately \$8.7 millionⁱⁱⁱ.

This program could be funded by either directly investing \$8.7 million in Nova Scotia Student Assistance, or by re-allocating existing funds that are currently inefficiently spent on post-secondary education.

ⁱ Statistics Canada. “Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study.” Statistics Canada. 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710004501>

ⁱⁱ Data provided by Nova Scotia Student Assistance

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID

The Nova Scotia Government spends \$27 million each year on tuition and education tax credits. The purpose of these tax credits is to help students afford the cost of post-secondary education, however these tax credits largely fail to achieve this. Studies have shown that these types of tax credits do almost nothing to increase or encourage enrolment in post-secondary, and fail to provide any financial support to students while they are in study^{iv}. Ontario and New Brunswick both reinvested their tuition and education tax credits to pay for their Targeted Free Tuition programs. Reducing the amount of these tax credits or eliminating them entirely and reallocating the money to Nova Scotia Student Assistance would easily allow for the implementation of a Targeted Free Tuition Program.

Alternatively, a Targeted Free Tuition Program could be funded by reallocating the \$24.8 million annually spent on the Nova Scotia Tuition Bursary. This bursary provides \$1283 in reduced tuition for Nova Scotia residents studying post-secondary in Nova Scotia. This bursary overly benefits students from higher income backgrounds and has not increased since 2011, despite average tuition increasing by 24% in that time period. Using the tuition bursary to pay for a Targeted Free Tuition Program increases the cost from \$8.7 million to \$12.8 million due to the resulting increased tuition for residents.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia introduce a Targeted Free Tuition Program within Nova Scotia Student Assistance, either by investing \$8.7 million or by reallocating the tuition and education tax credit.



Recommendation #2: Introducing Loan Forgiveness for NSCC Students

NSCC students are not currently eligible for the Student Loan Forgiveness Program. This is a disparity between the programs available to financially support Nova Scotians pursuing an education at NSCC rather than at a university. We believe that post-secondary students at both universities and NSCC should have equitable access to financial aid.

NSCC graduates largely find employment and stay in Nova Scotia. According to their most recent graduate survey, 87% of NSCC grads are employed, with 92% being employed in the province^v. While NSCC programs can be shorter and generally cost less than a university degree, **NSCC graduates can still be burdened by debt, which can delay significant life milestones such as buying a house or starting a family.** Prospective students should not have to consider financial aid mechanisms when considering their post-secondary options. In order to facilitate NSCC graduate transitions into the workforce and because NSCC students are equally deserving of loan forgiveness as university students, StudentsNS urges the Government to include NSCC students within the Student Loan Forgiveness Program, at an approximate cost of \$1.5 million/year.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia invests \$1.5 million annually to include NSCC students within the Student Loan Forgiveness Program, with similar regulations as those placed on university students.



^{iv} Neill, Christine. "What you Don't Know Can't Help You: Lessons of Behavioural Economics for Tax-Based Student Aid." C.D. Howe Institute. C.D. Howe Institute. November 2013. https://www.cdhowe.org/sites/default/files/attachments/research_papers/mixed/Commentary_393_0.pdf

^v Nova Scotia Community College. "NSCC 2016 Graduate Survey." NSCC. 2016. <https://www.nsc.ca/docs/about-nsc/publications/2016-graduate-survey-results-in-brief.pdf>

Welcoming International Students

One of the four core values of StudentsNS is accessibility. We believe that policies, programs, and services should ensure that all post-secondary students studying in Nova Scotia are able to access resources and support systems equally. Currently, there is large disparity in access to basic healthcare between domestic and international students in Nova Scotia.

Recommendation #3: Improving MSI Coverage for International Students

International students are critical assets to the province of Nova Scotia, as they contribute enormously to the economy and provide an opportunity to address the issue of youth out-migration. **To encourage international students to stay and live in Nova Scotia after graduating, it is important that they feel welcomed in our communities and supported by both post-secondary institutions and the province.**



To achieve this, we believe it is critical that the government of Nova Scotia improve international student access to medical service insurance (MSI) coverage. **Currently, international students are only eligible for MSI coverage after studying in Nova Scotia for 13 consecutive months, without spending 31 days outside of the province.** This means that international students are unable to return home over the summer to visit family, work, or even go on vacation.

These restrictions have contributed to low uptake of MSI coverage among international students and forces them to pay out of pocket for insurance plans that are inflexible and expensive. **These plans do not always cover the necessities of health care that Nova Scotian residents receive for free and can lead to international students paying thousands of dollars out of their own pockets for emergency hospital visits and surgeries.**

Improving international student access to MSI coverage is an effective way to help them feel more welcomed and integrated into our society. We can do this by changing the provisions to provide MSI coverage for international students after one semester of studies or approximately four months, as long as they remain enrolled in the following semester. Additionally, the 31 day rule should be eliminated or increased to 62 days to allow international students more flexibility to visit family and travel.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia amend its current provision to provide international students access to MSI coverage after one semester, or approximately four months in the province, and increase or eliminate the time spent outside the province regulation.



Investing in Student Employment

One of the four core values of StudentsNS is quality. We believe that policies, programs, and services in post-secondary education should meet student expectations and help prepare them for careers and success post-graduation by providing opportunities to gain experience and develop meaningful skills. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through experiential learning opportunities, such as the Co-Op and SKILL programs.

Recommendation #4: Expanding the Co-Op Education Incentive



Experiential learning during a university or college degree is directly related to meaningful employment after graduation. The most effective experiential learning occurs through student employment programs, as they enable students to gain paid work experience during their degree. **Over 63% of students with paid work experience are able to find a job after graduation, compared to 35% with no experience^{vi}.** Ensuring students gain paid work experience during their studies is critical to facilitating careers and lives in Nova Scotia post-graduation.

The Co-Op Education Incentive provides a \$7.50/hour wage subsidy to employers that provide career-related work experiences for university and NSCC Co-Op students, while requiring employers to pay students \$15.00/hour. The Co-Op Education Incentive prioritizes the quality and relevance of the work experience for students, and conversations with post-secondary co-op offices reinforce that many students who participate in co-op receive job offers upon graduating.

Co-Op programs are the most direct and successful method of experiential learning for students, however there is currently more demand for the incentive than funding available. In order to help more students gain work experience and stay in the province after graduation, Co-Op should be prioritized. Increasing the annual funding for the Co-Op Education Incentive from \$2.3 million to \$3.3 million annually would enable more employers to participate in the program by creating approximately 200-250 more positions for students^{vii}.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia invest an additional \$1 million annually into the Co-Op Education Incentive, creating approximately 200-250 more Co-Op positions and enabling more employers to hire students.



vi National Association of Colleges and Employers. "The Class of 2013 Student Survey Report: Results from NACE's Annual Survey of College Students". NACE. November 2013. <http://career.sa.ucsb.edu/files/docs/handouts/2013-student-survey.pdf>

vii Data provided by Labour and Advanced Education – Youth & Strategic Initiatives branch

Recommendation #5: Creating Diversity Incentives for Student Employment Programs

Conversations with co-op offices across the province consistently highlight the value of paid work experience for students, however they also identify barriers faced by students within co-op programs. **The most common recurring barrier is the difficulty that international students and students from diverse backgrounds have securing interviews and positions within co-op.**

Addressing this issue will help underrepresented students gain access to the workforce, increase the diversity of our workplaces, and help international students remain in the province after graduation. This can be accomplished by creating diversity bonuses within the Co-Op Education Incentive and SKILLs programs similar to the diversity incentive of the Graduate to Opportunity (GTO) program. **The GTO program diversity incentive has been very successful at motivating employers to hire more women, people with disabilities, and underrepresented groups.**

The Co-Op Education Incentive provides employers with a \$7.50/hour subsidy and requires employers to pay \$15.00/hour, while the SKILL program provides a \$8.85/hour subsidy and requires employers to pay \$11/hour. A diversity incentive for the Co-Op and SKILL programs should reward employers for hiring students from underrepresented groups with an additional \$2/hour and \$1/hour subsidy, increasing the total to \$9.50/hour and \$9.85/hour respectively, and should reflect the provisions of the GTO diversity incentive. Based on current participation in the Co-Op and SKILL programs, such an incentive could be created for approximately \$500,000 annually^{viii}.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia invest \$500,000 annually to create diversity incentives for the Co-Op and SKILL programs, increasing experiential learning opportunities for underrepresented groups.



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Sexual Violence Prevention

One of the four core values of StudentsNS is accessibility. We believe that policies, programs, and services should ensure that all post-secondary students studying in Nova Scotia are able to access training, resources and support systems equitably. **1 in 5 women will experience sexual violence while in post-secondary^{ix}. This is a critical issue in Nova Scotia, as we have continually seen high-profile incidents emerge on our campuses.** Requiring universities to develop standalone sexual violence policies was a strong first step to tackling sexual violence, however more must be done. Standalone policies need to be continually reviewed, implementation of policies should be reinforced with investment into resources and education initiatives, and data collection and transparency must occur on campuses across the province.

Recommendation #6: Requiring Transparency and Data Collection from Post-Secondary Institutions



Sexual violence is aggravated by cultural norms, known collectively as rape culture. To effectively address rape culture, sexual violence prevention must include a variety of educational programs, policies, and preventative measures to be effective. These efforts should be informed on regional data on the climate of sexual violence, which also provide benchmarks for improvement.

There is a lack of Nova-Scotia specific data on campus sexual assault because post-secondary institutions are not required to provide statistics on reports, disclosures, or investigations. Mandatory public reporting of these statistics will lead to more informed research on the climate of sexual violence, which can inform targeted educational and preventative programming, as well as sexual violence policies, which reflect the true needs of the province.

It is important for post-secondary institutions to be transparent about the climate of sexual violence on their campuses, including how supports are delivered, the number of formalized reports, as well as the number of general disclosures. This data can help institutions, researchers, community groups, and the Province develop more strategic and targeted methods to address sexual violence, as well as assess the efficiency of current practices.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia mandate annual data collection and public reporting on campus sexual violence from all post-secondary institutions in the province.



^{ix} Planty, Michael, Lynn Langton, and Jessica Stroop. Campus Climate Survey Validation Study Final Technical Report. Bureau of Justice Statistics Research and Development Series. (Washington: 2016). <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ccsvsfr.pdf>.

Recommendation #7: Funding Prevention & Support Resources on Campuses

Addressing sexual violence on post-secondary campuses should primarily focus on changing the culture on campus through prevention initiatives such as education, awareness, and training, however we must also acknowledge and support survivors.

Post-Secondary institutions across the province have indicated that they are struggling to provide the resources necessary to fully implement their sexual violence policies. For these policies to be most effective, campuses need to be capable of providing long term prevention measures such as education and training, in addition to providing support resources such as counselors and nurses. **Counselors should be trained specifically to handle sexual violence, and survivors must have access to Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners and any other health resources they may require.** Finally, it is important that campuses have a sexual violence coordinator position to implement policy, direct educational initiatives, and provide support to survivors.

Addressing this gap in resources is critical to combating sexual violence on our campuses. This could be accomplished by establishing a post-secondary sexual violence resource fund. This fund should be post-secondary specific and aimed at addressing resource or education gaps on campuses. Funding should be distributed through an application open to both institutions and student associations, but should favor projects that involve collaboration between the two. This would allow individual institutions to address the specific needs of their students and campuses.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia invest \$500,000 - \$1,000,000 to create a post-secondary sexual violence resource fund for institutions and student associations to address resource gaps on campuses.



Post-Secondary Mental Health

One of the four core values of StudentsNS is accessibility. Policies, programs, and services should ensure that students across Nova Scotia have rapid access to resources and support systems that provide appropriate care for mental health challenges. **The lack of mental health service capacity on campuses remains a significant barrier to accessibility for current and future students, although progress was made last year with the \$500,000 investment into the e-mental health strategy.** It is critical that we continue to build on this progress.

Recommendation #8: Continuing Funding for Innovative Post-Secondary Mental Health Programs

Mental health is an issue that overwhelmingly impacts students, as we are more likely to struggle with mental health challenges than any other age group. **1 in 5 deaths of Canadian youth between the ages of 15-24 are caused by suicide, and 70% of mental disorders develop before the age of 25*.** Wait times for public mental health services in Nova Scotia ranged from 45 to 363 days for adults^{xi} and 28 to 157 days for adolescents^{xii}. **To exacerbate this issue, private mental health services are largely unaffordable for students as many student health plans only reimburse a small amount of money and MSI does not cover the cost of private counseling or psychology appointments.**

On campus, waitlists for mental health related services can be up to 2 weeks and grow significantly longer throughout the school year. Despite increasing demand, on campus counseling services are unpredictably funded as post-secondary institutions manage tight budgets.

Last year, the Government of Nova Scotia provided \$500,000 in funding for the Association of Atlantic Universities to implement a suite of innovative, technology-based mental health tools on every campus in Nova Scotia. These programs include Therapy Assistance Online, Kognito, 7-cups, and Good2Talk, all of which are research based and have proven effective on other campuses across North America. **These e-mental health tools form the basis of a strategy to modernize mental health resources on campuses and provide more efficient care to students.**

These services are evidence-based and have been demonstrated to work on other campuses, and we are excited to demonstrate their utility in Nova Scotia. **Unfortunately, the one-time funding provided is not sufficient to continue these programs beyond this year.** We require committed funding for these tools over the next three years, and additional funding for promotion on campuses. This would allow the Association of Atlantic Universities to collect and analyze data from the strategy to ensure its efficacy.

We anticipate that this small amount of funding will pay off enormously for the province. A 2015 study conducted in California examined the economic impact of mental health intervention programs at post-secondary institutions in the state. The study found that implementing mental health supports on campuses resulted in a 13.2% increase in graduation rates, and the net social benefit from those graduates was estimated to be \$56.1 million in lifetime earnings and \$8.5 million in increased tax revenue^{xiii}. Nova Scotia is exponentially smaller than California, yet we predict that these programs have the potential to save lives, reduce the burden on the public mental health care system, and ultimately help more students graduate.



StudentsNS recommends that the Government of Nova Scotia invest \$600,000 annually to fund the Association of Atlantic Universities e-mental health tools pilot project for another three years, and require institutions to report on the implementation and outcomes of this strategy.



x Mental Health Commission of Canada. "Taking the Next Step Forward Building a Responsive Mental Health and Addictions System for Emerging Adults." Mental Health Commission of Canada. 2015. http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/Taking%252520the%252520Next%252520Step%252520Forward_0.pdf

xi Government of Nova Scotia. "Mental Health Adult Community-Based Services." Government of Nova Scotia. 2018. <https://waittimes.novascotia.ca/procedure/mental-health-adult-community-based-services#waittimes>

xii Government of Nova Scotia. "Mental Health Child and Adolescent Community-Based Services - Nova Scotia Health Authority." Government of Nova Scotia. 2018. <https://waittimes.novascotia.ca/procedure/mental-health-child-and-adolescent-community-based-services-nova-scotia-health-authority>

xiii Ashwood, J. Scott. "Payoffs for California College Students and Taxpayers from Investing in Student Mental Health." Rand Health Quarterly 5, no. 4 (May 2016); <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5158226/>

xiv Government of Nova Scotia, CONSUP. "Memorandum of Understanding Between the Province of Nova Scotia and the Universities of Nova Scotia 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019." Government of Nova Scotia. 2015. <https://novascotia.ca/lae/pubs/docs/MOU-2015-2019.pdf>

xv Association of Atlantic Universities. "Universities: Partners For A Prosperous Nova Scotia." Association of Atlantic Universities. 2013. https://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/sites/default/files/documents/CONSUPReports/Universities%20-%20Partners%20for%20a%20Prosperous%20Nova%20Scotia_FINAL_June20%2713.pdf

The 2019-2024 Memorandum of Understanding

The four core values of StudentsNS are accessibility, affordability, quality, and role of the student voice. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is an agreement signed between the Province of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Universities. It sets the fundamental direction of post-secondary education in the province by determining public funding levels, system priorities, tuition and fee policies, transparency and accountability mechanisms, and educational and quality measures. **The following are student recommendations to ensure that the upcoming MOU improves the accessibility, affordability, quality, and role of the student voice in our post-secondary system.**

Recommendation #9: Tuition Policy

The market adjustment loophole in the current MOU has left Nova Scotia students with the second highest tuition in Canada and the highest tuition increases year after year. To create a tuition policy that is predictable for students and fair for universities, we recommend that the 2019-2024 MOU:

- Caps tuition increases for all students and programs by the rate of inflation.
- Protects international students by implementing a cohort system that guarantees their rate of tuition for the duration of their degree.
- Eliminates “market adjustments” and do not allow any other loopholes that would enable large tuition increases.

Recommendation #10: Student Consultation & Institutional Accountability

The current MOU guarantees student consultation multiple times^{xiv}, however this was interpreted inconsistently across institutions. To guarantee students are meaningfully consulted and institutions are held accountable, we recommend that the 2019-2024 MOU:

- Clearly defines student consultation and the role it plays in university decision making processes.
- Mandates the creation of consultation agreements between universities and their student associations.
- Requires universities hold a student referendum in order to introduce any new fee.
- Creates an annual review process to determine whether institutions are meeting the criteria of the MOU.

Recommendation #11: Public Funding & Deferred Maintenance

The main positive of the current MOU is the guarantee of 1% funding increases to universities. While this funding provides consistency and predictability, it does not keep pace with inflation nor address the over \$500 million in accumulated deferred maintenance across our universities^{xv}. To ensure our post-secondary system is sustainable, we recommend that the 2019-2024 MOU:

- Increases university operating grants by 3% annually providing institutions meet the criteria of the MOU.
- Invests \$50 million annually into an infrastructure fund for universities to address rising deferred maintenance and accessibility challenges.

Recommendation #12: Supporting Student Success

The issues of sexual violence, mental health, health services, and indigenization directly impact the every day experiences of students. They should be continually prioritized by our universities to cultivate safe, diverse, and welcoming campus environments. To continue the work on these important issues, we recommend that the 2019-2024 MOU:

- Prioritizes sexual violence prevention by reviewing standalone policies, mandating training for faculty and staff, and providing resources for survivors on campus.
- Prioritizes campus mental health by providing greater access to counselors and updating academic accommodations policies.
- Prioritizes student health by increasing the availability of health professionals such as doctors and nurses on campus.
- Prioritizes indigenization by creating campus task forces, providing cultural competency training, and developing more indigenous degree/course offerings.



StudentsNS gives students
a united voice in **Nova Scotia**.



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