

Investing in Nova Scotia's Future, Today

2016 Pre-Budget Submission



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STUDENTSNS.CA

923 Robie Street, Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

Introduction

The following submission has been prepared by Students Nova Scotia (StudentsNS) in advance of the 2016 Nova Scotia Budget. Our Board of Directors, representing our seven member student associations, has identified three key priorities for Nova Scotia students: enhancing the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program, supporting underrepresented groups, and providing MSI coverage to International Students. The changes StudentsNS is proposing, while they may be directed at current and future post-secondary students, will have positive effects for all Nova Scotians including: decreased out migration, increased internationalization, and increased retention and residency. All of these are goals of the oneNS report, *We Choose Now – a playbook for Nova Scotians*, released in 2015.

In a year in which tuition will go up for every student in Nova Scotia, StudentsNS has prioritized our most vulnerable students to ensure access and affordability through modest investments. The requests presented in this pre-budget submission total \$4 million in 2016-2017, with additional commitments of \$2.35 million in 2017-2018 and \$1 million in 2018-2019. Such multi-year commitments will signal that this government understands the need to support its students with sustainable funding into the future.

Priority 1: Increase the grant-loan ratio for Nova Scotia Student Assistance from 40-60 to 50-50

Cost: \$2.7 million over 2 years.

StudentsNS is calling on the province to continue to invest in the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program (NSSAP), a program that has had much success for our most vulnerable students. In 2013/2014, the number of students receiving assistance to attend post-secondary education in Nova Scotia was approximately 13,700. Changes to this program would thus affect almost 25% of students studying in this province. With such a high proportion of students with the potential to benefit from these changes, their importance cannot be overlooked.

In 2015, Nova Scotia received a call for all individuals to address outmigration when the oneNS Coalition released its report *We Choose Now*. This report emphasized the need for this province to address the “deep ‘v’” of outmigration that illustrates young people of this province leaving to settle and contribute to the economy elsewhere. By investing in student assistance, this province can illustrate to students their commitment to creating conditions for young people to study in this province and create residency here.

StudentsNS has, over many years, prioritized investment in the NSSAP to ensure that access is maintained and expanded for qualified students. By changing the grant to loan ratio, the government also has the possibility to make post-secondary education more affordable in Nova Scotia. Access and affordability are pillars of StudentsNS; ensuring this province maintains both access and affordability for all qualifying students, even as the cost of university increases, is essential to the future of Nova Scotia.

In 2014, StudentsNS was happy to see that the province implemented a 0% interest policy on provincial loans.¹ The Government again made a strong policy change in 2015, implementing the loan forgiveness program. This program forgives the loan portion of the Nova Scotia provincial loan if a student finishes their program within four years (or ten years for those students living with a disability). Unfortunately, in 2015 the Provincial Government also allowed for a one-time market reset that will increase tuition for almost every student in our province. As such, more work must be done.

¹ Students Nova Scotia. (March 2014). Students Pleased Nova Scotia Eliminates Interest on Provincial Student Loans. Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/2014/03/students-pleased-nova-scotia-eliminates-interest-provincial-student-loans/>

With the improvements made to the NS Student Assistance Program in recent years, the program is now considered to be one of the best in the country. With the rising costs of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia, as a result of recent market adjustments and annual tuition increases, it is imperative that government continues to enhance the program to ensure that we continue to have one of the best programs in the country. This is a shared responsibility between the Federal and Provincial governments. Students who have the highest need are the ones who access Student Assistance Programs. We must ensure that these students, who would be unable or unlikely to pursue a post-secondary education (PSE) due to insufficient resources and high debt, continue to have the opportunity for a quality education.

Due to the continued increase in cost of post-secondary education, it follows that the grant to loan ratio should be adjusted. If the grant to loan ratio stays stagnant, and the cost of university continues to rise, Nova Scotia will, in fact, be graduating more students with higher debt. The limits of this ratio should be adjusted to address costs to ensure students have access to funds, in the form of grants, that will – at least in part – address the rising cost of attending post-secondary education in Nova Scotia.

It is important to recognize that this is a request spanning two budget years. StudentsNS recognizes the fiscal constraints that the current government is operating within. As such, StudentsNS is calling on the government to move the grant to loan from 40/60 to 45/55 in 2016-2017 and then from 45/55 to 50/50 in 2017-2018. This would come at a combined cost of \$2.7 million.

Nova Scotia can make a huge step towards reducing student debt by converting loans to grants. High student debt leads to increased pressures on graduates, delaying the starting of a family and the increasing the likelihood of outmigration.¹ The Nova Scotia government has stated time and time again that youth retention is a top priority. For outmigration trends to be reversed, students must graduate with significantly smaller debt. Converting the Nova Scotia Student Assistance grant to loan ratio from 40/60 to 50/50 over two years would benefit Nova Scotian students and increase the likelihood that they would be able to stay in Nova Scotia and contribute to the economy.

¹ Students Nova Scotia. (September 16, 2014). No More Farewells: Making a place for youth in Nova Scotia's economy. Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2014-09-16-employment-report-FINAL.pdf>.

Priority 2: Increase the Weekly Maximum Student Assistance Limit to \$210 per Week

Cost: \$3 million over 3 years.

StudentsNS is calling on the government to increase the maximum assistance from \$180 to \$210 over three years to match the federal maximum assistance limit. Students' need is calculated based on their costs to attend a post-secondary institution, minus their available resources. Many students do not receive the total amount that they require to attend post-secondary education; those costs that are above and beyond what is covered by the Federal or Provincial student assistance programs, is termed unmet need. In 2014-2015 there were 2,829 students in Nova Scotia with unmet need; these are Nova Scotia's most vulnerable students.¹

By matching the federal maximum assistance, Nova Scotia signals that this province is willing to continually lead the conversation around student assistance. Without adequate assistance, these students will be left to pay for their education by working multiple jobs, applying for bank loans, or maxing out credit cards; none of these options lead to the long-term success and prosperity of our students or this province.

In a year in which many programs will increase by far more than the cost of inflation in this province, it is important that the student assistance program keeps pace. Even after the dust has settled from the one-time market adjustment, the increased financial pressures for students in the coming years will be vast. For those who require the maximum assistance, and are still left with unmet need, changes must be made to ensure that these students continue to have the opportunity to pursue their education.

StudentsNS's request, simply put, is about affordability for our most vulnerable students. It is about increasing access and affordability and ensuring that all qualifying students in the province have the opportunity to attend the post-secondary institution of their choice.

¹ Personal correspondence with NSSAP, January 18, 2016.

Priority 3: Support for Underrepresented Communities

Cost: Approximately \$1.1 million

Indigenous Nova Scotian Support

The Indigenous youth population is the largest growing population in Canada.¹ Many of these students are looking to pursue post-secondary education. In consultation with Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK), StudentsNS has identified two needed investments.

StudentsNS with the support of MK, are calling on the government to implement the Nova Scotia Indigenous Education Bursary. This bursary would provide Indigenous Nova Scotia students with a \$1,000 for every year of their study. Chief Leroy Denny stated that, "An investment in our Mi'kmaq students is an investment in our future. We want to ensure these students have the ability to complete their post-secondary education and are given the opportunity to give back to their communities."

The second component of this submission is the creation of a Minister's Advisory Panel to address colonialism within post-secondary education. "We must take concrete steps to eliminate colonialism in the education system. It is only then that we can fully realize a path to reconciliation in Canada," stated Chief Leroy Denny.

This advisory panel would assess colonialism within Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions in both governance structures and the classroom. Such an initiative would begin to fulfill the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.² It is the proposal of Students Nova Scotia and MK that this advisory panel would be co-chaired by the Minister of Labour and Advanced Education, or her delegate, and Chief Leroy Denny, or his delegate.

1 A Portrait of First Nations and Education. (October 1, 2012). Assembly of First Nations. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf

2 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action. (2015). Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Retrieved from: http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

African Nova Scotian Support

Nova Scotia has a long-standing presence of Indigenous and African Scotian communities. Unfortunately, both are underrepresented in the post-secondary education system. African Nova Scotian students along with Indigenous students face a number of challenges, including financial ones, which exist because of systemic discrimination. In consultation with the Delmore “Buddy” Daye Learning Institute, Students Nova Scotia is requesting that the government create an African Nova Scotian Bursary Program that would provide \$1,000 for every African Nova Scotian post-secondary student for the entirety of their study. While some bursaries do already exist for African Nova Scotians, this bursary would further address the need for dedicated funding for this community and their pursuit of post-secondary education. Sylvia Parris, Chief Executive Officer of the Delmore “Buddy” Daye Learning Institute, said, “Such an investment by the provincial government would support African Nova Scotian students to realize their potential and to more easily attend post-secondary institutions. This would increase access which is essential for our community and for Nova Scotia.”

Priority 4: Provide MSI Coverage to International Students Immediately Upon their Arrival

Cost: Approximately \$625,000

StudentsNS, once again, is calling on the Province of Nova Scotia to provide international students with immediate MSI coverage upon their arrival for study.^{1,2,3} The approximate cost to the province, of \$99.85 per person, is far less than the cost to individuals to insure themselves and their dependents through private companies.⁴

The oneNS report, titled *We Choose Now - a playbook for Nova Scotians* released in 2015, called for a commitment to increase immigration to Nova Scotia, attract and keep more international students, and ensure our communities are welcoming and supportive for all new comers.⁵ The most substantial, concrete step that the government can take is to cover our international students at public PSE institutions with MSI coverage immediately upon their arrival for study.

Currently, our international students are eligible for coverage, but only once they have been studying in Nova Scotia for 13 consecutive months without 31 consecutive days outside the province. That means that international students cannot go home for the summer break if they want to be covered by the Nova Scotia health card coverage. The only option left for these students is to purchase health care coverage through their institution or student association. This comes at an upfront cost to students that may limit access to low-income international students. As well, due to the different plans provided at the different institutions, there is not consistency for students and this can lead to students being unsure as to what is covered.

1 Students Nova Scotia. (February 4, 2015). Pre-Budget Submission: International Students. Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015-02-04-2015-Pre-Budget-Submission-International-Students.pdf>.

2 Students Nova Scotia. (January 31, 2014). Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2014-Pre-Budget-Submission.pdf>.

3 Students Nova Scotia. (February 11, 2013). Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/StudentsNS-2013-Pre-Budget-Submission.pdf>.

4 Students Nova Scotia. (February 4, 2015). Pre-Budget Submission: International Students. Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015-02-04-2015-Pre-Budget-Submission-International-Students.pdf>.

5 We Choose Now - a playbook for Nova Scotians. (December 9, 2015). Retrieved from: <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/560e8359e4b015462b7d4b37/t/5638d589e4b0ce96e22646ad/1446565257252/15-43356+We+Choose+Now+FOR+WEB+Nov+2.pdf>.

This province has a world-class health care system that provides access to varied services; access to such services would benefit our international students at a relatively low cost to the province. In 2014, StudentsNS estimated that for \$625,000, approximately 5,691 international post-secondary students would benefit along with 576 of their dependents.¹

In Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and British Columbia, full health coverage is available to international students at the beginning of their studies. It is time that Nova Scotia follows suit and provides this coverage for international students studying in Nova Scotia. The post-secondary market is very competitive and providing students with MSI coverage could be the difference between a student choosing Nova Scotia or another jurisdiction. If Nova Scotia wants to continue to be the post-secondary destination for many international students, MSI coverage should be provided to these students immediately upon their arrival.

Providing MSI coverage for our international students, immediately upon their arrival for study, will provide the needed health supports. It will also play a vital role in creating the welcoming community that the members of the oneNS Coalition called for in the *We Choose Now* playbook. The provision of MSI coverage is a concrete “Welcome” to our students that shows international students that Nova Scotia is a place to study, take up residency, and stay.

¹ Students Nova Scotia. (February 4, 2015). Pre-Budget Submission: International Students. Retrieved from: <http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015-02-04-2015-Pre-Budget-Submission-International-Students.pdf>