



# Advocacy Brief Package 2020 (DRAFT)

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## The AMS and GSS of UBC (Vancouver)

The Alma Mater Society and the Graduate Student Society of the University of British Columbia – Vancouver represent over 58,000 undergraduate and graduate students and are incorporated under the Societies Act on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations . In our efforts to improve the quality of students’ educational, social, and personal lives, we advocate for affordable and accessible post-secondary education in BC. The pandemic has given us an insight into the many flaws in our higher education system that should be addressed to support students and their families for generations to come. Several immediate steps can be taken by the province to achieve those goals. As a result, the AMS and GSS are proposing the following:

### Housing Affordability and the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Include students in rental support programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Complete the provincially mandated leading practices manual for student housing providers.

### Supporting Post-Secondary Education in British Columbia

3. Conduct comprehensive and multifaceted a review of post-secondary operational funding grants.
4. Make certain that there are predictability measures for international students in terms of tuition fees and ancillary costs through the Tuition Limit Policy.

### Access for Indigenous Students

5. Fulfill the government’s commitment to expand the tuition waiver program to all former Youth-in-Care.

## 1.1 HOUSING AFFORDABILITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic is continuously evolving, and the challenges imposed by the pandemic continue to worsen on a daily basis. Throughout the summer and into the beginning of the fall of 2020, the pandemic began to ease along with the necessary restrictions imposed by the provincial government. In understanding that the provincial government has declared that the province is currently undergoing a second wave of the pandemic and with necessary restrictions continuing to be put in place, student and their families will be adversely impacted by the loss of employment opportunities.

While these restrictions are necessary, post-secondary students will face the same financial impacts that they did back in May. In May, over 76% of students cited some type of financial concern and approximately 50% of students cited financial hardship with regards to accommodation <sup>1</sup>. Housing expenses serve as one of the largest expenses for students and they continue to take a large portion of savings, student loan payments, part-time employment income, and in many cases, grocery allowances. At UBC, over 65% of graduate students and 47% of undergraduate students experience severe financial hardship due to the cost of housing <sup>2</sup>. In taking into account that this data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this data will be amplified even more due to the impending economic impacts of the second wave.

Throughout the 2020 provincial elections, a large part of the NDP platform was dedicated to “Making Housing More Affordable & Available” <sup>3</sup>. The important points discussed in this section of the platform allowed students and their families to retain their hope for an affordable and equitable future when it came to the costs associated with housing and tenancy rights altogether. A key point in this section of the platform was the establishment of a rent freeze to the end of 2021 along with capping rent increases to only inflation as opposed to the previous formula of 2%+inflation <sup>4</sup>. On November 9<sup>th</sup>, the provincial government established a rent freeze which would be in effect until July 10, 2021 <sup>5</sup>.

These commitments, while supportive of the general BC population, forget student housing once again. All provincial housing support programs such as the Temporary Rental Support (TRS) program since the beginning of the pandemic have left out student housing – a key choice of residence for many students due to close proximity to campus. This exclusion, as recognized by the provincial government since the Rent with Rights campaign in 2015, results in student housing providers being able to work outside the legal framework of the Residential Tenancy Act <sup>6</sup>. While the act is responsible for establishing the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords, the statute is also used as an eligibility criteria item for support programs like the TRS. Effectively, this eligibility item leaves students out of programs and policies such as the 2020 rent freeze.

Another important platform point that is of concern to students due to the unaffordable nature of housing in British Columbia is the establishment of a renter’s rebate program <sup>7</sup>. In understanding the policy trends from the provincial government, this \$400 income-tested rebate program should cover student housing and should not require eligibility standards that are unattainable by students. As previously mentioned, students are one of the hardest hit demographics of the COVID-19 pandemic and in understanding that post-secondary students are the future workforce of British Columbia, it is essential that the provincial government support students throughout these unprecedented times.

## 1.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Extend the established province-wide rent freeze due to end in July 2021 to student housing to ensure that students are not being subjected to unfair university-mandated rent increases. Subsequently, make certain that rent increases are capped to solely inflation for residences under the Residential Tenancy Act along with student housing on post-secondary campuses.
2. Follow through with the commitment towards establishing a \$400 income-tested renter's rebate while also ensuring that students are included in the program in understanding the adverse impacts imposed on students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Fulfill the provincial government's commitment to addressing the nine recommendations of the Rent-With-Rights campaign through the Student Housing Working Group which is mandated to complete a leading practices manual to be distributed to student housing providers.

## 2.1 SUPPORTING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Post-secondary institutions play an important role in building a strong, sustainable, and innovative economy as they produce qualified, well-trained, and creative individuals who are workforce ready. As this is one of the key goals of the provincial government, it is important that post-secondary institutions are well-funded, strictly regulated in terms of the fees that they charge and are able to deliver on the affordability needs of students. This venture of creating a world-class higher education system requires the provincial government to adapt to the financial needs of students and their families by funding post-secondary institutions in an efficient manner. Without funding from the province, colleges and universities are forced to raise their tuition fees for both domestic and international students accordingly. Though the provincial government has consistently provided funding towards higher education institutions to make up more than a third of their operational budgets, the amount of funding has been decreasing on an annual basis <sup>8</sup>.

To contextualize this further, the provincial government funded post-secondary institutions during the 1970s and 1980s by 80% to 90% of their operational budgets <sup>9</sup>. Today, this funding value has decreased to just over 36% in 2019 <sup>10</sup>. While this funding decrease is proportional, it is clear that this gradual decrease in funding must be made up by post-secondary institutions in their operational budgets. The ways in which this shortfall is made up is through international student tuition increases and service-related budget cuts which may include cuts to mental wellbeing services.

As a result of this annual decrease in funding, post-secondary institutions and specifically smaller institutions automatically resort to increasing their ancillary and tuition fees. While there is a 2% cap on tuition increases for domestic students, international student tuition has, at times, increased by over 20% to make up for the revenue loss by decreasing provincial operating grants <sup>11 12</sup>. Canada and by extension, British Columbia, is competing with countries around the world to attract international talent <sup>13</sup>. In understanding this fact, it is the responsibility of the provincial government to make certain that post-secondary education is accessible for potential labour demographics such as international students.

Many of the services that are pertaining to students are not expenses that should be accrued and paid by the University; rather, these are expenses that should be paid by the province due to their policy and budgetary commitments. A key example of the aforementioned is health and wellbeing expenditures that are currently funded by individual post-secondary institutions. UBC has allocated over \$7.8 million towards student health and mental wellbeing services throughout previous fiscal years <sup>14</sup>. While the provincial government has made renewing commitments towards the mental wellbeing of students by establishing that through policy improvements and budgetary allocations, post-secondary institutions have been charged with paying for mental health and wellbeing services. In understanding the financial impacts that COVID-19 has imposed on the budgetary positions of higher education institutes in British Columbia, it is imperative that the provincial government contribute towards student services to avoid necessary service-related budget cuts by institutions <sup>15</sup>. We can understand that with the cyclical nature of institutional budgets, these costs, whether service or academic-related, are then levied onto students through tuition increases.

At UBC, this severe loss in revenue is readily apparent through the running of a \$225 million deficit. Subsequently, this loss in revenue led to a \$36 million cut in student services <sup>16</sup>. While the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been as negative as expected at UBC due to the ability of the institution to amend its deferment guidelines, post-secondary institutions with lower application and admission rates are being put in tough financial positions. With this idea in mind, we can understand that post-secondary institutions rely heavily on international student tuition. International students account for an average of 25% of post-secondary institutional operational budgets <sup>17</sup>. Over time, post-secondary institutions will be forced to increase their international student fees by unreasonable amounts. As a result, international student enrollment will decrease due to the lack of affordability options that British Columbia offers. Without international students, the current post-secondary funding model will fail.

## 2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase post-secondary institution provincial operating grants to a proportional baseline of 50% of each institution's budget.
2. Make certain that there are predictability measures for international students in terms of tuition fees and ancillary costs through the Tuition Limit Policy.
3. In understanding the problems that decreases in operational funding pose to the entire post-secondary sector as a whole, take into account the perspectives of not only student organizations and unions, but also post-secondary administrations, staff, and faculty unions when conducting a review of operational funding. This multifaceted approach will allow for the analysis around tuition rates, fair wages, service-related initiatives, and capital improvements.

### **3.1 ACCESS FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS (AWAITING FINAL CONSULTATION/FEEDBACK FROM THE AMS INDIGENOUS COMMITTEE)**

It is important that the provincial government find ways to support its residents, citizens, and more specifically, its Indigenous people. In order to understand the gaps of support with regards to access to post-secondary education for Indigenous students, we must look at the Indigenous Youth-in-Care program. With the Youth-in-Care being a governmental support program that is intended for children, adolescents, and youth governmental resources, there is a pressing expectancy of Youth-in-Care to rely on the provincial government for financial aid <sup>18</sup>.

According to a report published by Statistics Canada on the educational attainment of Indigenous people, only 48.4% of Indigenous people had a post-secondary qualification <sup>19</sup>. This data shows us that it is essential that the provincial government continue to support Indigenous people in pursuing a post-secondary education.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be seen that the new majority government has made several commitments with regards to the future of Indigenous youth in British Columbia. The government has made new investments into BC's needs-based Access Grant with the intent to reduce barriers to accessibility <sup>20</sup>. There are also commitments made to keep student fee increases low, to make post-secondary education and skills training more accessible by opening 2,000 spaces for childcare, medical schools, and healthcare training programs. The AMS and GSS were excited to hear about these investments and appreciate the provincial government's contributions made to post-secondary education.

A key commitment that must be prioritized is the expansion of the tuition waiver program to all former Youth-in-Care. This commitment is currently included in the Minister of Advanced Education's mandate letter <sup>21</sup>. In understanding that Indigenous communities are a demographic that has been disproportionately impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is key that they are supported with workforce training to contribute to the recovery of BC's economy. The commitment to expand the tuition waiver program to all former Youth-in-Care is working towards the goal of fulfilling Article 14 (3) and Article 21 (2) of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples <sup>22</sup>.

### **3.2 RECOMMENDATION**

- 1.** Fulfill the government's commitment to expanding the tuition waiver program to all former Youth-in-Care in order to make certain that Indigenous people are being given equitable academic opportunities.

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- <sup>5</sup> BC Gov News. “Rent freeze extended, pending increases cancelled”. November 9, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/>
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