Post Secondary Education and Treaty Rights

Post-secondary education (PSE) is a treaty right guaranteed by so-called Canada to the Indigenous peoples of this land. This was first asserted in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and re-affirmed as a constitutional right in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982. In addition, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People states that Indigenous people have a right to education. However, the legacy of colonialism, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, the millennial scoop, and rampant racism continue to impose significant barriers for Indigenous peoples to access post-secondary education. Further, removing children from their homes, lands, communities, cultures and mother tongues is an act of genocide. As such, the Federal and Ontario provincial governments have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure Indigenous people have access to quality education.

State of Indigenous Education

More than 16,000 Indigenous students attend Ontario’s public colleges and universities— this accounts for half of the Indigenous post-secondary students in Canada, and ~1.7% of Ontario’s post-secondary student population. However, post-secondary funding for Indigenous education in Ontario is insufficient, difficult to access, and difficult to use.

Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) is responsible for providing funding mechanisms to help Indigenous students pay for the cost of post-secondary education. The ISC administers the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) and the University and College Entrance Preparation Program (UCEPP), which provide funding to eligible First Nations and Inuit post-secondary students— Métis students are excluded from this funding. In the 2021 Budget, the Federal government devoted $150.6 million over the next two years to the PSSSP, as well as the Inuit and Métis Post Secondary Education Strategies. This is an inadequate amount to account for the roughly 32,000 Indigenous students currently attending post-secondary education in Canada. In fact, ISC indicates that funding is limited, and not all students will be funded. As such, Indigenous communities face a significant financial barrier to accessing post-secondary education, and limited funding has only made the situation worse.

Note on Terminology: In this document, the term “Indigenous” is used to describe persons of First Nations, Inuit and Métis origin.
Indigenous Institutes

In addition to the students enrolled in Ontario colleges and universities, there are more than 1,200 students enrolled in the nine Indigenous Institutes in Ontario. Indigenous Institutes provide Indigenous-centred education rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and living\(^5\), and are considered the ‘third pillar’ of the Ontario post-secondary education system. Surveys have shown that students of Indigenous Institutes excel, due in part to a greater sense of community and belonging\(^6\). Although Indigenous Institutes provide a welcome alternative for Indigenous students to learn in a culturally relevant environment, non-Indigenous institutions must still improve their structures and practices in order to better serve Indigenous students.

In contrast, Indigenous students enrolled in non-Indigenous institutions have reported that post-secondary courses, systems, and supports in Ontario do not adequately incorporate Indigenous students, history, or cultures\(^7\). Students called for greater presence of Indigenous role models leading classrooms, and mandatory Indigenous history training for faculty and staff. Students also indicated that a Western worldview dominates their course content. 45% of Indigenous students reported having to contend with racism, isolation, and the marginalization of Indigenous student knowledge\(^8\). Scholarship on Indigeneity remains excluded from non-Indigenous institutions, such that many non-Indigenous students graduate from these institutions with little understanding of racism and decolonization\(^9\). Indigenous students face discrimination from students and faculty, and attest that the administration has not taken sufficient action to implement institutional change\(^10\). Non-Indigenous institutions must do more than simply increase the ‘diversity’ of their classrooms and faculty— they must prioritize decolonizing their institutions as a whole.

Despite the value Indigenous Institutes contribute to Ontario’s post-secondary education, they are vastly underfunded. While Indigenous Institutes rely on government funding for 90% of their operations, they receive insufficient funding of $4 million a year from the Ontario government\(^11\)— this works out to an average of ~$444,400 for each institute. In 2019, Ontario devoted a one-time extra funding of $22.8 million. However, Indigenous Institutes cannot rely on one-time funding to run their programs. Ongoing programs cannot be supported with funding that will not be renewed. Staff and services cannot be reliably retained if the funding to pay for them is unreliable. One-time funding does not effectively improve sustainable and equitable access to post-secondary education for Indigenous students. As a result, Indigenous Institutes specifically operate with minimal full-time staff, and almost no full-time faculty. As a result, their programs and services are not able to develop or run consistently\(^12\).

Insufficient funding of Indigenous Institutes

Indigenous Institutes rely on government funding for 90% of their operations.

Yet they receive only $4 million a year from the Ontario government\(^11\)— mere average of ~$444,400 for each institute.
Compared to non-Indigenous institutions, Indigenous Institutes lag behind in terms of basic education infrastructure. For instance, only 15% of Indigenous Institutes have dedicated study spaces, 15% have off-campus housing assistance, 35% have counselling services, and 35% have cafeterias—100% of colleges and universities in Ontario offer all of these services. In fact, Indigenous Institutes estimate that they require double the amount of funding the Ontario government currently offers to reliably improve their services and infrastructure. Failure to fund Indigenous Institutes is a failure to fund access to equitable, culturally relevant post-secondary education for Indigenous students.

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.