

**Post-Secondary Education:
Considering the Options**
**A Paper Prepared by the
First Nations Education Steering Committee
To Inform National Dialogue**
May 24, 2010

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) has created this paper in response to proposed changes to the federal government's Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP).

Specifically, FNESC is aware that the federal government has stated its intention to "take a new approach" to its PSSSP, which may include "coordination with other federal student support programs." Several commentators have subsequently presented a range of assertions and recommendations regarding the federal government's support for post-secondary education.

FNESC also is familiar with the actions taken by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in response to that situation. FNESC supports the efforts of the AFN to communicate with First Nations across Canada in regard to the important and varied assertions that have been made, and to coordinate a national voice in responding to any proposed changes.

This paper is intended to clearly share the perspective of First Nations in British Columbia (BC) for all considerations of PSSSP changes.

It is critical to note that this paper is a preliminary reflection of FNESC's positions on these matters. This paper does not reflect FNESC's ongoing commitment to presenting positions that have been thoroughly reviewed by BC First Nations representatives and leadership. While the assertions made within this document reflect long-standing principles that have been reached collaboratively with First Nations in BC, the specific issues highlighted within have not yet been discussed in detail through FNESC's well-established communication and accountability mechanisms. *Thorough Board and community consultation processes will be implemented as soon as possible, and a final response to proposed post-secondary changes will be presented once those processes are complete.*

THE PERSPECTIVES OF FIRST NATIONS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Importance of Post-Secondary Education

FNESC and First Nations in BC maintain that post-secondary education is critical for the development of First Nations communities as well as individual First Nations citizens. Post-secondary participation and success represents an opportunity to break the devastating cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement of First Nations peoples, as higher learning provides First Nations people a critical opportunity to contribute to their personal and community well-being, and indeed

to the economic development of all of Canada. In addition, First Nations have a right to culturally relevant, high quality, and effective post-secondary educational opportunities.

FNESC further maintains that the federal government's PSE program, while flawed, is resulting in important benefits for First Nations learners and communities. The PSSSP has allowed thousands of students to attend post-secondary education – students who would have been unable to do so without the availability of PSSSP financial support.

Accordingly, First Nations in BC have expressed considerable objections to all suggestions that the PSSSP program might be administered by another federal government department. First Nations have made extensive efforts to work with INAC to increase awareness of and support for the lifelong learning needs of First Nations, and it is critical that the PSSSP continue to be implemented through INAC with a focus on education. If administered through another department or mechanism, there is a strong possibility that the PSSSP emphasis could shift to other vital but distinct program areas.

Need for Consultations

In responding to potential changes to the PSSSP, as well as in our critiques of the numerous papers and commentaries that have been written on this subject, FNESC has continuously maintained that First Nations must be appropriately and effectively consulted in determining what, if any, changes are made to the PSSSP.

In fact, in an April 8, 2010 meeting in the BC Region including First Nations leadership and INAC officials (the Quality of Life Meeting), federal government representatives confirmed that there would be no changes to the PSSSP without thorough consultations with First Nations. FNESC and First Nations leaders in BC are determined to ensure that INAC continues to recognize that commitment, as well as numerous other promises that have been made in regard to support for greater First Nations post-secondary success, such as those made at the First Ministers' Meeting on Aboriginal issues on November 24th/25th, 2005.

At that meeting, First Ministers and Aboriginal leaders committed to strengthening relationships on a government-to-government basis, and on focusing efforts to close the gap in the areas of education, health, housing and economic opportunities. Those discussions led to the signing of a Transformative Change Accord that included, among many other agreements, a commitment to undertake immediate actions:

To close the gap in education by ... focusing resources on ... and post-secondary training, including skills, training and apprenticeships.

Respecting the Model in Place in BC

In BC, FNESC and First Nations have worked closely with INAC BC Region to design and implement a unique approach to allocating federal PSSSP funding – an approach that takes into account fluctuating community needs and student population levels that vary on a year-to-year basis.

In this province, the following process is used for allocating the PSE funding that is available through INAC for CFA First Nations.

1. A portion of the BC Region PSE allocation is allocated to each CFA First Nation using a per capita formula. On an annual basis, each CFA First Nation's initial allocation is calculated according to its audited statement of previous eligible PSE expenditures. In order to receive its full per capita allocation (which is called the "protected pool"), each First Nation is required to submit information to INAC indicating that the Nation has a sufficient number of eligible applicants to use their full per capita funding amount.
2. A second portion of the BC Region PSE allocation is captured in what is referred to as a "general pool." First Nations that have additional eligible students who could not be funded through the Nation's per capita allocation are eligible to apply for funding from that general pool, which is the collection of all unused protected pool funds.

Each year, the amount of funding requested by First Nations has far exceeded the amount of PSE funding available in the BC Region. Therefore, there remains a concern that the total amount of money available for PSSSP is inadequate. FNESC is now finalizing research that is intended to clearly demonstrate to INAC the actual level of resources needed in BC.

However, the model currently used in BC has proven effective in ensuring that PSSSP funds are used for PSE, and First Nations in BC and INAC BC Region have generally expressed satisfaction with the administrative processes that are in place.

Model Strengths

Although developed prior to the Auditor General's review, this unique and collective allocation methodology actually addresses concerns raised in the Auditor General's March 2009 critique of INAC's PSE program.¹

- The model directly addresses the Auditor General's concern that some First Nations were retaining surpluses in their PSE budgets while other First Nations could not fund eligible students.
- By promoting greater efficiencies and collective support, the model used in BC also responds at least partially to the Auditor General's extensive suggestions regarding possible insufficiencies in the federal government's PSE funding (see Addendum 1) – although fully addressing this issue is not possible without expansion of the funding envelope.²
- The BC allocation process is intended to respond to changes in varying needs amongst communities on a year-to-year basis, and to promote greater equity in the use and allocation of the limited PSE funding that is available.

The objectives for the BC Region PSE allocation methodology, as jointly determined by FNESC and INAC BC Region representatives, are as follows.

- To ensure First Nations PSE allocations fund First Nations students/communities equitably

¹ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Audit of the Post-Secondary Education Program. Audit and Assurance Services Branch. Project #07/20: January 23, 2009.

² First Nations nationally, and in BC, are currently finalizing comprehensive research that demonstrates the need for significantly greater levels of PSE funding. BC Region's research will be finalized summer, 2010.

- To demonstrate the need for BC to access additional funding in future years based on unmet needs of First Nations students/communities for lifelong learning
- To demonstrate that First Nations communities and INAC in BC are leaders in accountability and continue to lead the country
- To build capacity for PSE in communities and within INAC

Therefore, First Nations in the BC Region have shown a willingness and ability to work cooperatively to make the most effective possible use of PSE funding, and First Nations in BC can clearly meet INAC's stated goal (presentation materials from INAC BC Region, April 15, 2010):

We want to determine how best to increase First Nation and Inuit access to post-secondary education and ensure that the maximum number of students are benefitting from available resources. INAC's PSE program should ensure that funding reaches the students who need it most.

The BC PSE allocation approach has made significant improvements in ensuring the most equitable and efficient use of the limited funding that is available. While improvements to the approach may be possible, First Nations in BC want to ensure that the unique work done in this province is recognized, respected, and continued when potential changes are explored, as the approach meets several important objectives, including the following.

- Retaining program responsibility within INAC rather than within another agency, helping to ensure a continued focus on education.
- Responding to concerns raised by the Auditor General in terms of promoting effective, equitable distribution of PSE funding and avoiding the use of PSE surpluses for alternative uses.
- Addressing the goal of local control with support and policy development from a regional management organization.

Position Summary

Generally, FNEESC asserts the need to ensure that any changes to the PSSSP are advantageous for First Nations, including recognizing and enhancing ongoing arrangements that are working well. First Nations in BC have consistently supported the principle of local responsibility for PSSSP student funding, and the principle of local control is a cornerstone of both the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972) and *First Nations Control of First Nations Education* (2010) policy papers. First Nations in BC, **working with INAC BC Region**, have already developed an innovative approach to allocating post-secondary funding that involves local control and addresses issues related to varying student populations and fluctuating community needs for PSE funding.

Therefore, FNEESC maintains that the current PSSSP administrative model that is being used in BC should continue, at least until the end of INAC's current educational mandate. Further, First Nations in BC fully expect to meaningfully participate in the next PSE authority renewal process in order to appropriately inform and ensure further improvements to the PSE program.

Addendum One
Excerpt from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
Audit of the Post-Secondary Education Program
Audit and Assurance Services Branch. Project #07/20: January 23, 2009

7.1.2 Recipient Funding Requirements

... The objective of the Program is to improve the employability of First Nation people and Inuit by providing eligible students with access to education and skill development opportunities at the post-secondary level. As per the Program T&Cs approved by TBS, providing access to post-secondary education funding is intended to lead to greater participation of First Nation and Inuit students in post-secondary programs and therefore higher employment rates for First Nation people and Inuit.

The Program, initially administered by the department, provided funding for all eligible students. In 1989, the Program was revised to allow for the deferral of student applications in instances where student eligibility exceeded the available Program budget. As was explained during one regional visit, recipient funding at that time moved from "a demand driven (fully funded) model" to an "equitable distribution of available funds" model. Since then, TBS allocations to the department have increased on a percentage basis, with current increases at 2% annually.

It is apparent that at least two external factors currently jeopardize Program effectiveness. Firstly, the cost of sending a student to a post-secondary institution is increasing, most notably in the area of tuition costs. While the scope of the audit did not include a detailed analysis of tuition costs, information from Statistics Canada indicates that the average annual increase in these costs over the past decade was 4.3%. [Note 1] The audit also noted that student enrollment in the Program has declined over the past eight years from 27,000 students (1998/99) to 22,000 students (2006-2007)

Secondly, there is evidence to suggest that not all eligible students are able to obtain Program financial support due to a lack of Program funds. While the department does not gather information nationally of wait-listed (or deferred) students, regional office visits confirmed that some First Nation recipients have wait-listed students. The audit team also noted that the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) reported in November 2004 that (in 2000) the Assembly of First Nations estimated that a lack of funding was preventing approximately 9,500 First Nations people from pursuing post-secondary education.

While there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that the cost of obtaining post-secondary education is increasing (at a rate greater the annual increases provided to INAC) and that some Program recipients have wait-listed students, no analysis has been conducted by Program management at headquarters on the impact these factors are having on the department's ability to achieve the Program's objective of improving the employability of First Nation people and Inuit. ...

Recommendation:

The Director General, Education Branch should undertake a review of the sufficiency and appropriateness of recipient funding requirements, in light of increasing education costs and the available information on wait-listed students, to ensure that the department is able to meet the objectives of the Program.