

Report cites issues with federal student fund

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OTTAWA — Federal officials believe the largest federal program aimed at helping aboriginal students pay for post-secondary education faces numerous issues, including a financing cap which limits the fund's ability to keep up with rising tuition costs.

A federal review from summer 2015 suggests the support program needs more money, because a two-per-cent annual escalator is not in step with the increasing cost of tuition.

The report was among briefing materials sent in December to the top official at Employment and Social Development Canada as part of an effort to help the federal government eliminate barriers which keep indigenous students under-represented on campus.

The Canadian Press obtained copies of the documents under the Access to Information Act.

"It's literally affecting the potential future in communities by limiting the access to education," NDP indigenous affairs critic Charlie Angus said of the spending cap.

"The government knows just how overstretched this program is and they are very clear in their internal briefings about the devastating effect that the two- per-cent cap has, so why is it still there?"

The government has said it is working with aboriginal communities on a path forward for indigenous education.

The Liberals promised during last year's election to add \$200 million over four years to the program that allows band councils to distribute money to students to cover eligible costs, including tuition, books, travel and living allowances.

The promised money wasn't included in the Liberals' first budget, angering student groups that continue to lobby for an increase in funding.

The government instead increased money for non-repayable student grants and waived student loan payments until a recipient is earning over \$25,000 a year — moves the government promoted Tuesday just as students return to college and university campuses.

It's unclear whether those moves would specifically help aboriginal students.

The Canada Student Loans program doesn't collect details on aboriginal students. The review cites anecdotal evidence that use of the program is weak among aboriginal students and cites research showing aboriginal students are more likely to be averse to debt and less likely to borrow to pay for school.

Universities and colleges have tried to tackle the financial barrier facing aboriginal students by offering more scholarships and bursaries directed to indigenous learners, but demand for help can outstrip supply, said Sheila Cote-Meek, associate vice-president of academic and indigenous programs at Laurentian University in Sudbury.

Many aboriginal students coming from reserves live in families that can't afford tuition costs, she said. Federal funding through band councils also isn't always enough to cover living costs, nor does it cover aboriginal students who aren't affiliated with a band, Cote-Meek said.

Those who do attend college or university often have extra costs to carry, such as child-care costs because many move to campuses with families in tow, she said.

"They're not usually the typical university student, which is a typical university student coming out of a high school system. They have family responsibilities, so the financial burden tends to be that much higher," Cote-Meek said.

The University of Winnipeg has an endowment to alleviate that financial burden. Students who are part of the fund have money put aside annually starting when they are in kindergarten to help cover their tuition at the university, should they attend.

"For us getting kids to think about university really begins at day one," said Kevin Lamoureux, the school's associate vice-president of indigenous affairs.

"We're trying to build relationships with families right from the beginning so that they always know that university is waiting for them and that it will be a safe place."

Schools are trying to increase the rates of post-secondary education attainment among aboriginals by having elders design aboriginal-centred courses and create supports specifically designed for aboriginal learners.

And starting this year, students at the University of Winnipeg will be required to take an indigenous-focused course in order to graduate.

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