

THE UBYSSEY

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Portrait of the artist

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Native grads' aid threatened

Students rally for changes in government policy

By Ilona Biro

Native graduate students may be denied student assistance in the future because they chose the wrong academic subject, if a new federal policy comes into effect.

Native students across Canada have joined forces to oppose the new Native Post-Secondary Student Assistance Program (PSSAP), which requires native students to "engage in studies that directly contribute to achieving self-government and economic self-reliance," if they want continued federal funding.

On Tuesday a rally was held at Robson Square, and Wednesday night B.C. Indian student leaders met with Ronald Penner, director of education for the B.C. region, to discuss the new policy.

In that meeting, several concerns were brought up by Native students who are disappointed with the rushed consultation process and the time frame that has been set for Native input into the policy paper. The consultation process began in mid-August and is due to end in a few weeks.

The policy goes to the Treasury Board for approval at the end of November and will come into effect as of April 1, 1989.

The government states in the introduction to the policy changes paper that its main objectives are to improve academic success rates and attendance of native students in post-secondary programs and to contribute more directly to the goals of Indian self-government and economic self-reliance.

But under the new guidelines, Native grad students will only be supported for 48 student months, as opposed to 96 months under the old program. And special incentives grants, which have a maximum of \$750 for Masters students, and \$1500 for doctoral students, will be more difficult to get, as a result of new criteria which require Native graduate students to enrol in selected disciplines.

Though the Department of Indian Affairs has pledged to take all native input into account in drafting the final policy, students are skeptical. Ron Peigan, spokesperson for the National Native Law Students, says the policy suggests educated Indians pose a threat to the government.

"Why is the government taking aim at our right to education? In plain language, with education comes knowledge, and knowledge brings power. The Indians have been attacking the government for 20 years, and they don't like it."

Penner said at Wednesday's meeting that "they (the federal government) admit that they have no business defining self-government. But I'm not sure how they're going to implement this if no one defines self-government." The report makes no mention of how 'self-government' is to be defined.

Native student leader Bev Scow says arbitrary definitions could be imposed by bureaucrats institutionalizing the definition of self-government so that Indian PhD candidates in Philosophy or Canadian Literature could conceivably be denied assistance, because their studies are considered "non-essential" for the goal of native self-government.

Verna Kirkness, Director of the UBC First Nations House of Learning, said the policy was a paradox. "The government wants self-government, yet they don't promote the necessary tools."

Bev Scow says the proposed policy misses the mark. "The First Nations peoples may not know for some time what self-government will be and what types of education will be most appropriate."

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Another problem with the policy is that while the government wants to promote local control of the program, the policies of Indian band councils "must be consistent" with that of Indian Affairs. The government's invitation to bands to develop their own education policies appears to be a contradiction in terms.

The policy has put a fixed budget on the PSSAP, forcing Indian leaders to make a choice: should the government fund more students with less money, or less students with more money?

Penner says that the government had no choice in the matter, citing growth rates of 28 percent per year in Native post-secondary enrolment in the past three years.

The new policy will put a limit on growth at ten percent. Last year at least 400 B.C. Native students were deferred due to a lack of funds, and under the new policy even more will be.

Penner says "that will always be the case as long as you have high demand and a fixed budget", but he notes "the PSSAP is by far the most successful program run by the Department of Indian Affairs."

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Native students rallied for better education funding on Tuesday

MANDEL NGAN PHOTO

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The funding cuts directly affect living allowances which are not geared to regional disparities, nor are they tagged to the rate of inflation. A single student living away from home will receive \$575 per student month (down from \$621 under the previous policy), whether they live in costly Toronto or in Prince George. Extra costs like daycare, special shelter allowances and other contingencies that previously allowed for more flexibility in living allowance have been eliminated.

A native student who is accepted to an elite foreign institution, (i.e. Harvard Law School), will only receive as much support as they would need to attend "the

most comparable program in the nearest Canadian institution." Penner admits that "comparable is defined in a very narrow way," and Scow adds that the system seems to penalize native students who demonstrate high academic standards.

Until the 1950's, Indians had to surrender their native status in order to accept a B.A. degree from a Canadian university. To be an educated Indian was a legal contradiction in terms. Though conditions have improved greatly since then, in light of the new PSSAP, today's native students are ever more committed to protecting the educations of native students.