



University
of Manitoba
**STUDENTS'
UNION**

UMSU's Provincial Priorities and Recommendations

Introduction

The University of Manitoba Students' Union represents the needs of over 26,000 undergraduate students. UMSU's purpose is to provide the undergraduate student community with advocacy, support, and services that positively impact their academic experience and their holistic development.

UMSU is a member of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA), which provides federal advocacy initiatives and opportunities to its members. UMSU is also a founding member of the Manitoba Alliance of Post-Secondary Students (MAPSS), which provides advocacy on the provincial level.

The University of Manitoba campuses and the UMSU offices are located on the original lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation, and on the original lands of the Inuit. Outlined below are UMSU's priorities and recommendations for the provincial government to best support the students and communities that we serve.

As we emerge from the pandemic, **UMSU identifies the overwhelming need for services and supports that enhance the quality of student life and post-secondary education available to the University of Manitoba undergraduate students.** The content below lists UMSU's priorities for the provincial government and what we would like to see implemented to improve the post-secondary experience of Manitobans.

Mental Health

Mental health is a pervasive issue across Canada and an epidemic in Manitoba, especially in the 18-35 age demographic. Notably, this demographic encompasses the majority of post-secondary students. The pandemic has had lasting effects, especially on health and well-being. According to *Manitoba Health's* 2021 Statistics:

*Between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021, 27.4 percent of Manitobans age 10 and older received medical care for at least one of the following mental illnesses: mood and anxiety disorders, substance abuse, personality disorder, or schizophrenia.*¹

Rates of mental illness among Canadian students are particularly high. A recent survey completed by the *Canadian Alliance of Student Associations* (CASA) reveals that 75% of students surveyed had experienced negative mental health at some point during their schooling.² **Additionally, 50% of students surveyed had accessed the mental health supports offered by their post-secondary institution. However, many students also identified substantial barriers to receiving the mental health support that they needed.** The need for mental health supports on and off campus is evident.

Poor mental health has a variety of negative consequences, such as poor academic performance and low graduation levels. A Canadian report done in 2021 stated that mental illness “has been shown to **impact academic functioning, leading to decreased academic performance and dropout.**”³

This data reveals the need for a multi-faceted approach to supporting students with mental health struggles; therefore, UMSU recommends the following:

Invest at least 10% more into mental health and community wellness supports for the province.

Invest specific and additional funding to the University of Manitoba’s Operating Budget to bolster mental health supports on-campus.

Manitoba’s 2023 budget allocates \$439 million towards Mental Health and Community Wellness. UMSU believes this number should increase by at least 10%. **This additional funding would lessen the strain placed on university mental health services. In conjunction with this, we recommend that specific and additional funding is allocated in the UM Operating Budget to fortify mental health supports on-campus.**

International Student Healthcare

In 2018, the provincial government took international students off the provincial healthcare plan. International students are pivotal to the success of Manitoba’s economy, diversity, and competitiveness.

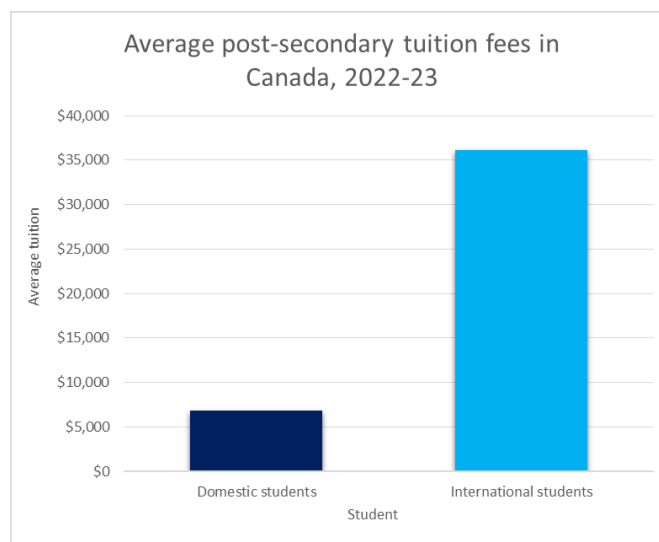
¹ “Manitoba Health Annual Statistics 2020-21,” *Government of Manitoba*, June 2023, p. 31.

² “The New Abnormal: Student Mental Health Two Years Into COVID-19,” *Canadian Alliance of Student Associations*, 7 September 2022.

³ “Evaluating a combined intervention targeting at-risk post-secondary students: When it comes to graduating, mental health matters,” *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 2021, p. 313.

Not only do international students pay tuition that is up to five times higher than the tuition of Canadian students, but they have also had to pay a premium for basic healthcare for the past five years.⁴ In fact, during the 2022-23 academic year, undergraduate international student tuition was 184.0% more than the tuition of Canadian students.⁵

International students are essential to the success of not only our university community but also our province's competitiveness. In 2018 alone, international students contributed approximately \$21.6 billion to Canada's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and to 170,000 jobs across Canada.⁶ For context, international students' contribution to Canada's economy totalled more than auto parts, lumber, or aircrafts.⁷ In Manitoba in 2019, international students alone injected approximately \$400 million into our economy.⁸



Data taken from: "Tuition Fees for Degree Programs, 2022-23," Statistics Canada, 7 September 2022.

Taking international students off the provincial healthcare plan has saved Manitoba a mere \$3 million. **When considering the immense socio-economic benefit that international students bring to our province, it is clear that the financial savings do not outweigh the long-term harms.** The province must focus on attracting international talent to improve our competitiveness and our economy. Offering free healthcare is one such way to do this.

Given these facts, UMSU recommends that the provincial government:

Reinstate international students onto the provincial public healthcare plan at zero cost to them.

⁴ "Tuition Fees for Degree Programs, 2022-23," Statistics Canada, 7 September 2022.

⁵ "Tuition Fees for Degree Programs, 2022-23."

⁶ "Canada's International Education Strategy," Global Affairs Canada, 2020.

⁷ "2020 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration," Government of Canada, 2020.

⁸ "Number of International Students," Government of Manitoba, March 2019.

This should be implemented by re-establishing the system that was used before 2018. There is precedence for this plan, the benefit of which will be felt across the province. **Healthcare is a human right and a provincial responsibility.**

Financial Aid

It is widely known that post-secondary education and higher learning outcomes are linked to economic growth and high employment earnings. However, students are sacrificing financial security in order to pursue their studies. In 2015, 40% of Manitoban students graduating with a bachelor's degree had debt over \$25,000 at graduation, and the average cost of this debt was \$29,000.⁹

In order for Manitoba to continue to grow economically, education must be made accessible and affordable. Increasing non-repayable funding sources like grants for Manitoban is one way to do this. An investment in postsecondary is an investment in the job market, which is an investment in the province.

Manitoba currently has the second-lowest educational attainment rate in the country of citizens aged 25-34.¹⁰ In 2018, Manitoba ranked the lowest in the country for post-secondary participation and graduation rates at 62%.¹¹ The Minister of Advanced Education at the time stated that the government would like to see this attainment average climb 15 points by 2023. It has now been five years and Manitoba's attainment rate has only risen four points.

Post-secondary education is becoming increasingly critical to economic success, as **"six out of 10 new jobs created by economic growth over the next five years will require post-secondary education."**¹² As the cost of living and inflation increases, it is critical that effort is made to ensure that education is affordable and accessible. Therefore, UMSU recommends the following:

Increase Research Manitoba's funding by 15% to offer more research grants for students.

Increase the Manitoba Student Loan from a maximum of \$250 to a maximum of \$300 per week of study.

Move the deadline for notifying students on bursaries from the fall term to mid-summer.

Making post-secondary education more accessible means making it more affordable. This fight must employ a varied approach. Firstly, we recommend increasing Research Manitoba's funding by 15% to ensure that our province remains research-intensive. It is notable that the majority of research grants given to students are allocated to graduate students, given the structure of their programs. However,

⁹ "Student debt from all sources, by province of study and level of study," *Statistics Canada*, 2015.

¹⁰ "The State of Post-Secondary Education in Canada," *Higher Education Strategy*, 2022.

¹¹ "Manitoba has the lowest college graduation rate in Canada," *CBC News*, 2018.

¹² "Manitoba Government Announces Increased Financial Support for Post-Secondary Students," *Government of Manitoba*, 20 June 2023.

UMSU believes that more funding should be allocated towards undergraduate research, which undoubtedly contributes positively to our province.

As a member of the U15, the University of Manitoba produces invaluable research that contributes majorly to our province, particularly in the “not-for-profit medical research, income and income growth across Canada” research, where we ranked first in 2021.¹³

Additionally, we request that the Manitoba Student Loan maximum weekly allowance increases from \$200 per week of study to \$250 per week of study. While the June 2023 provincial decision to increase this benefit from \$140 to \$200 is a step in the right direction, this is still not sufficient for students pursuing their education, especially given that it took 18 years for any increase to occur. As both the cost of living, inflation, and tuition all increase, more must be done to ensure that students receive the support they need.

Finally, UMSU recommends that the deadline for notifying students about the status of their bursary application be moved to mid-summer. Currently, many students do not find out if they have received funding until fall term has already started. This delay leaves students in an unfair situation where they do not know if they will be able to afford tuition for the year, yet do not have enough time to apply for different sources, potentially leading them to have to drop out of classes.

Student Housing

It is widely understood that there is a housing crisis occurring in Manitoba. **The cost of living makes day-to-day life difficult for any Manitoban, but especially those who are most vulnerable, like students.**

There is a lack of reasonably priced housing for students. In a recent housing consultation performed by the Manitoba government, participants illustrated that individuals who are members of vulnerable populations experience significant barriers to accessing housing. One example given was that:

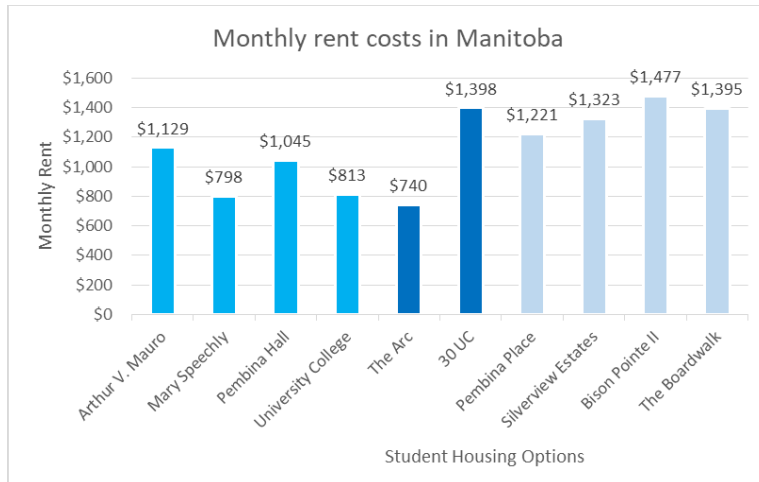
Low-income unattached individuals and students tend to be overlooked because they often do not meet program criteria, while also encountering limited affordable options for studio and one-bedroom units.¹⁴

Prices for student-specific housing are exceptionally high, yet, students who live in these housing units “may not apply”¹⁵ for Manitoba’s non-EIA Rent Assist program.

¹³ “Annual Report 2021-2022: A Source of Research Excellence,” *Research Manitoba*, 2022, p. 10.

¹⁴ “Manitoba Housing consultations: What We Heard Report 2022,” *Government of Manitoba*, 2022, p. 8.

¹⁵ “Rent Assist,” *Government of Manitoba*, 2022.



The graph above illustrates the monthly cost of rent for student housing in Manitoba. The first four options are University of Manitoba residences, the dark blue bars are student housing, and the light blue sections are apartments near the University of Manitoba (less than 5km away from campus).

While residence options are, on average, the most affordable, three of the four student residences are only available for first-year students. This criteria leaves a large majority of undergraduate students to need to find an alternative housing option such as an apartment or houses, where the cost significantly increases. This cost outlined above does not include paying for utilities, food, or paying for furniture, if staying in a non-residence apartment. The monthly average cost of the housing options illustrated above is \$1133.97 per month. One must also factor in the cost of tuition and the busy student schedule that often does not permit time for a full-time job, especially for students who must complete a practicum.

A study on post-secondary student homelessness done by University of New Brunswick professor, Eric Weissmann, reveals that up to **4% or 80,000 Canadian students have experienced homelessness or housing precarity such as sleeping in a car or couch surfing.**

There are significant barriers to affordable housing for students in Manitoba. Therefore, UMSU requests that the government:

Initiate a strategy and action plan for addressing student housing concerns in Manitoba.

Research needs to be done into these barriers and a strategy must be devised to address the barriers that are present and outline a clear pathway for students to access housing. If students need to choose between pursuing higher education or having a safe place to sleep, most will pick their basic needs over their degree. Weissmann suggests that, in order for change to occur:

Governments, housing ministries and research funders need to support efforts to understand the dimensions of [post-secondary student homelessness] and explore culturally intelligent solutions to student housing.¹⁶

¹⁶ “Post-Secondary Student Homelessness in Canada: New research on Prevalence, Intervention, and Prevention.” *The Homeless Hub*, 2019.

This is why UMSU recommends that the government invests research into the student housing sector and devises a strategy for tackling this issue. This issue requires a targeted approach – one that is separate from Manitoba’s poverty strategy and housing strategy.

Tuition

As illustrated above, the costs associated with being a student are immense.

This year alone, tuition at the University of Manitoba increased by 2.75%. This is approximately a \$13 increase per course from the 2022-23 academic year. While this may not seem to be a large increase, when considering the fact that the average student typically takes multiple courses, the rising costs of textbooks, and the high housing costs outlined above, any increase makes a difference. Therefore, UMSU is requesting:

The reinstatement of the freeze on tuition for a minimum of four years.

If the Manitoba government wants to attract talent to our province and encourage an increase of post-secondary education graduates, then tuition should be decreasing.

There is precedent for this freeze, not only in our province’s history, but also currently in Ontario, which is going onto its third year of its tuition freeze.¹⁷

Tuition hikes such as the ones that have been occurring in Manitoba over the past decade work to decrease university enrollment in low-income groups. These hikes are a step in the wrong direction, as they have the potential to lead to greater inequity in our province.

In addition, we request that research is done into a more long-term and sustainable financial model that keeps education affordable for students, but still allows universities to function and operate in a way that ensures that the quality of services and support for students is high.

As CBC aptly states:

In an era of high inequality and emboldened intolerance, saving money by reducing access to education for our most vulnerable citizens has the potential to compromise Manitoba’s long-term social and economic interests.¹⁸

¹⁷ “Ontario’s tuition freeze on colleges, universities continues for 3rd straight year,” *CBC*, 2 March 2023.

¹⁸ “From freeze to squeeze: Higher tuition puts pressure on Manitoba’s students,” *CBC*, 28 October 2017.