

ELIZABETH WONG

FOR VICE-PRESIDENT (EDUCATION)



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INTRODUCTION

DEAR MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY,

My name is Elizabeth Wong and I am running for MSU Vice-President Education for the 2022-2023 year. I have been involved in many diverse experiences ranging from the McMaster Students Union to municipal level politics in Hamilton. My passion for education started in high school and has continued throughout my journey at McMaster.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges, it has also brought to light ongoing challenges that students have been experiencing for quite some time. I believe that this year is unique and requires a fresh perspective in recognizing and mitigating these challenges. I am very excited to introduce my vision for the role of Vice-President Education in navigating these new and old challenges.

I hope that we can take on these challenges together to create a united community that is driven by advocacy. While I cannot promise you that I will be able to tackle every issue on campus, I can promise you that I will work my hardest to advocate and push for change on campus.

My journey has led to many opportunities and experiences that I believe would be an asset to this role. I want to work with you the SRA to strive for a better learning environment on campus. I hope to serve at VP Education to serve the McMaster community and to create broader change for education for all students.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Wong

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

MCMASTER STUDENTS UNION

- University Affairs Committee Member, **2019-2020**
- Speaker of the McMaster Students Union (MSU), **2018-2019**

POLICY AUTHOR

- Indigenous Students Policy, **2019-2020**

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

- Chief Returning Officer of the McMaster Social Sciences Society, **2021-2022, Present**

EXTERNAL EXPERIENCES

- Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board: Board Trustee Wards 1&2, **2022, Present**
- Innunco Academy: Business Project Management Coordinator, **2021-2022, Present**
- Hamilton Wentworth District School Board: Student Trustee, **2016-2017**
 - Rebranded the tagline for HWDSB & Established Student Senate
- Ontario Student Trustees Association (OSTA-AECO), **2016-2017**
 - Ontario Student Voice Awards Committee Member

EDUCATION

- Political Science and Labour Studies, **2018-2022, Present**
 - Business Certificate (Mohawk College & McMaster)

ELIZABETH WONG
for **MSU VP EDUCATION**

PLATFORM HIGHLIGHTS

- 1** HYFLEX CLASSROOMS AND ACCESSIBILITY
- 2** MSU ON AVENUE
- 3** SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
- 4** MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS
- 5** COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
- 6** TRANSIT

UNIVERSITY PRIORITIES

HYFLEX CLASSROOMS & ACCESSIBILITY

The return to campus has highlighted heightened issues of accessibility for disabled, elderly, and racialized people. The petition that circulated around McMaster in December and January highlighted a need for hybrid options and or online options for marginalized individuals. It is inaccessible and discriminative to force students who have fear or anxiety for their health, the health of their family members and community members. I would like to continue the work of the current VP of Education to continue to advocate for university policies that support HyFlex classrooms which are a combination of "hybrid and flexible" classrooms. I would continue to advocate for the university to invest in technology that would allow students to participate in learning either in-person or online, it is low cost and would allow students to access the same lectures and materials. I would also work with OUSA in creating a stronger front in advocating for HyFlex classrooms as this is currently one of their policy initiatives.

RETURN TO CAMPUS AND PRIORITIZING SAFETY

The return to campus has placed students in grey areas of "regular times" and "COVID" times. Communication between the university and students has been inadequate and has led to confusion among students. As we transition away from mask mandates and MacCheck, I would like to gather students' opinions on the efficacy of McMaster in their transition back to campus. I would like to work with the AVP University Affairs to research students' opinions towards McMaster's extended mask mandate, the availability of rapid tests & PPE, MacCheck, efficacy & clarity of communication around COVID, and other COVID concerns. I would then get information from the university regarding measurable data such as the number of daily MacCheck check-ins and compare these to the results of the research. I would then work with the AVP University Affairs to collate the data into a report that which would be shared with the university and used to strengthen advocacy efforts.

UNIVERSITY PRIORITIES

MSU ON AVENUE

I would like to continue the initiative to get the MSU on Avenue to increase communication with students and make it easier for them to access information about the MSU. For most students, accessing information about MSU initiatives, events, policies, etc., seems easy on paper but can be difficult in practice. I believe that if the education team continues to push and advocate for a page on Avenue, we would be able to increase student engagement like never before. We as students access Avenue every single day for our courses, grades, assignments, etc. In having a "course" page dedicated to the MSU, we would be directly connected to students in a way that I believe would be more effective than what we have seen through social media. This initiative would also reach students who do not use social media or do not follow MSU pages. This initiative would be done in collaboration with the university, the university communications teams, the MSU communications team, VP Admin, and the education team.

OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

If COVID has taught us anything about education, it has shown us that technology is accessible. Open education resources (OERs) are teaching, learning, and research resources that are available in the public domain. This is not a new initiative but it is a key point of advocacy that can reduce the financial strain of university costs on students. OERs have saved students in Ontario around \$1.7 million dollars according to OUSA. They make education more affordable and accessible for all students. I would continue to advocate for OERs by working with the AVP University Affairs to engage with faculties and instructors about the benefits of OERs.

PROVINCIAL PRIORITIES

TUITION AND FINANCIAL AID

The freeze announced by the Ford government is welcomed by students but cannot be considered adequate in supporting students in need of financial aid. I would continue to advocate for the continuation of tuition freezes to ensure students can access affordable education. I would also continue to advocate with OUSA's stance that the freezing of tuition should be complemented with increased operating grants to institutions and OSAP funding for students in financial need. Tuition is a financial burden on students but is not the only financial burden of students. Affordability continues to be a barrier to education, thus why it has been a continued effort on the part of the MSU's priorities within the education portfolio. The tuition freeze also does not apply to students who are attending from out-of-province or international students.

SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students should not bear the disproportionate financial burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to domestic students. International students are valued members of the McMaster community and deserve the same equitable treatment. As stated in my point above, reductions and freezes to tuition do not apply to out-of-province or international students. In 2021, the report from the Auditor General found that Ontario's public college fee revenue was reliant on international students. Between the 2016-17 academic year and 2019-20, revenue from international students' tuition increased by 152%, while domestic tuition revenue dropped by 3%. I would advocate for caps to be placed on international students' tuition to ensure international students are not bearing the brunt of financial burdens associated with COVID-19. The scope for supporting international students also falls under the federal priorities in ensuring that we are advocating for consistent, accessible, and straightforward procedures and paperwork for international students.

PROVINCIAL PRIORITIES

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The need for mental health support has been an ongoing issue for a long time but has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. It is one of the most pressing issues experienced by students on university campuses across Ontario.

Though McMaster has mental health support for students through the Student Wellness Centre, experiences of students have shown that these resources are not sufficient in addressing the concerns of students. Many students have expressed concerns about long wait times, lack of support, lack of longevity with support, and lack of counsellors with diverse experiences and backgrounds. It is simply not enough to just have counsellors on campus. OUSA is currently pushing for a "whole-of-community" approach where government, universities, students, and community healthcare providers come together to support student mental health. OUSA also highlights the need for reducing stress and anxiety by managing the transition from high school to university and into work force. They also highlight a need for peer-to-peer support services to ease these transitions.

I would push for a multi-step plan that involves engaging the community, university, school boards, community healthcare providers, and other stakeholders. To ease the transition between high school to university, I would work with the Ontario Public School Boards Association and Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association to assess and develop strategies to ease this transition. I would also work with the VP Admin to utilize MSU Spark as peer connection between high school and university. In terms of easing the transition from university into the work force, I would engage with the Student Success Centre to create strategies to ease transitions. I would also engage with external stakeholders to build connections for workplace opportunities. I would also advocate to get better coverage for mental health services through OHIP, the current regulations make it difficult for individuals to access mental health care services that are not provided by family care practices.

FEDERAL PRIORITIES

STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

The current system of federal financial aid in Canada is inequitable and is inaccessible to those who cannot afford post-secondary education. The financial burden of education and repayment is high. I would align with the recommendations suggested by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. I would advocate for students getting automatic access to minimum loans to cover education costs (tuition, ancillary fees, etc.), reallocate funding for students that need financial aid, that loans should be available to working students, the expansion of grants in a range of incomes, expand grants to students, reducing repayable percentage, and assistance programs that would further support students with no-employment or low-middle employment.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION & SUPPORT

I would work in partnership with Indigenous groups on campus such as the McMaster University Indigenous Education Council to develop an action plan for decolonizing education policies, creating strategies to advocate for Indigenous education, and increasing support for Indigenous students through programs such as the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). I want to not only work in collaboration with Indigenous partners but to really approach Indigenous education and support by advocating, "not about us without us." I want to support Indigenous education & support for students but I only want to do this by working with Indigenous groups to establish issues and to create solution.

MUNICIPAL PRIORITIES

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We at McMaster are so lucky to be in such a vibrant and diverse city. I would like to continue to work with youth in Hamilton and increase overall connections with the community. Hamilton has so much to offer in terms of volunteer opportunities but it is difficult to find information about these opportunities. I would work with the education team, especially the AVP Municipal Affairs to create a "database" or "hub" of volunteering opportunities in Hamilton. I would also like to reach out to organizations like McMaster Innovation Park to discuss the possibilities of creating partnerships for students to gain internship experiences in workplaces. I would also like to work with organizations such as the Hamilton and District Labour Council to pursue initiatives that align with MSU students' interests. These are just some ideas and opportunities that could come out of working with the community but the possibilities are endless.

STUDENT HOUSING

The financial stresses of COVID-19 include the difficulties in finding affordable housing. Issues around student housing have always been an area of advocacy but again like many other issues, COVID-19 has exacerbated these issues. There have been increases to rent, decreased availability, and lower quality/standards of housing for students. I would continue the work of the current VP Education and plan events and communications on rental licensing and tenant rights. I would not only be open to continuing to run events around tenant rights but to create information packets that outline tenant rights and legal services available to students who are disputing with landlords. I would also continue to advocate for rental licensing to enhance transparency and accountability with landlords and tenants.

MUNICIPAL PRIORITIES

TRANSIT

My vision for transit is split into collaborating and changes with the stakeholders: Go Transit, Hamilton Street Railway (HSR), and SOBI bikes. Public transit is a key factor in the lives of university students. Advocating for the continued use of public transit also ties into board priorities for sustainability and divestment on campus.

The Go Transit buses behind Mary Keyes are convenient for students who are looking to travel back home. The current issue is that there are long-line ups, especially on Fridays for students who are trying to take Go Transit buses out of McMaster. I would like to negotiate with Go Transit for higher frequencies of buses out of McMaster on Fridays. I would also like to conduct research around when students typically use Go Transit buses. I believe that there is an opportunity to expand Go Transit usage and increase public transit across cities.

I would also like to review the current HSR bus schedules for bussing in and out of McMaster, Sunday bussing schedules, and summer bussing for students living and working on campus. The frequency of HSR buses during the school week is consistent but could use expansion during busy days such as Fridays or during peak times. I would also like to conduct research around when people use HSR to determine if times should be renegotiated. I would also advocate for extended bussing on Sundays as students are returning from home or require transit to campus. I would also like to reopen the discussion around extending the use of the 51 bus into the summer for students who are still living and working on campus.

I would also continue the work of the current education team in what they have achieved in negotiations with SOBI thus far. I would continue to ask for support for SOBI at budget submission and also work with SOBI to ensure that McMaster students have access to bikes on campus.

MSU ADVOCACY

STUDENT HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Through consultation, one issue that was prominent was the need for stronger support and increased access to the Student Wellness Centre. Students should have equal access to mental health care services, sexual health services, medical services, and other health and wellness-related services. Students trying to access the Student Wellness Centre for help and support often find themselves unable to book appointments that are not over a month away and they struggle to get continued care. I would continue the work of the current education team by continuing to advocate for better mental health care services funded by the provincial government. I would also advocate for long-term funding for on-campus services so that students do not need to find themselves waiting over a month for appointments or abruptly getting their counsellors changed. I would also conduct research on student opinions on virtual mental health services. With COVID, many mental health services moved online, if students suggest that these services would be beneficial, I would definitely advocate for a system that also branches into virtual mental health care, which would give students more access to these services.

MUNICIPAL AND FEDERAL ELECTIONS

Election seasons mean that the MSU will undergo changes in terms of policy and advocacy. As we have experienced in the past when elections come around we as students are at the "mercy" of these changes. I would work with the entire education team to establish or re-establish connections with our newly elected officials. I would like to establish MacVotes events for both upcoming provincial and municipal elections. These events would allow the education team to not only promote elections but to re-establish connections with students. I would also advocate to Elections Canada for satellite polling booths on campus again. These satellite polling booths were well utilized by students before COVID and would be an accessible way for students to vote.

MSU ADVOCACY

ADDRESSING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Addressing racism and discrimination is an ongoing issue that requires multiple levels of advocacy and action. I believe that there are opportunities for actionable change and education in working with OUSA and using their directions from the "Addressing Racism and Religious Discrimination" policy brief.

In terms of Student Wellness, I would advocate for the hiring of diverse mental health care providers to accommodate the diverse population of students at McMaster. It is important for students accessing mental health care to connect with their counsellors and for their counsellors to understand their unique life experiences.

Racism, discrimination, and a legacy of colonialism are present in academia. It is important to strive toward decolonizing academia as it perpetuates a culture and system of beliefs that Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour are inferior and lack value in academic spaces. I would advocate for the review of syllabi from an EDI lens to move towards the decolonization of academia. I would also advocate for the mandate suggested by OUSA to have independent, confidential reporting structures for staff, students, and faculty to raise issues around equity. I would also advocate for increased provincial and federal funding for Anti-Racism Initiatives.

BOARD PRIORITIES

SUSTAINABILITY & DIVESTMENT

I would work in collaboration with the MSU Sustainability Education Committee and other stakeholders at McMaster to support divestment and sustainability on campus. Sustainability and divestment are currently a priority of the MSU and of the education team, it has also been a platform point of past VPs. I would like to create actionable policies that can be implemented in our business units by collaborating with the VP Finance. I would also like to work with the AVP University Affairs to hold McMaster accountable for their signing of the United Nation's principles for Responsible Investment in striving toward sustainability and divestment.

COMMUNICATION & CONNECTION

From consultation and my personal experiences, I have found that the MSU is disconnected from students, especially those who started at McMaster during the pandemic when the campus was shut down. I believe that this disconnect is not a new issue but something exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. I think this just gives us an opportunity to re-establish and strengthen the communication between the board and students. I would work in tandem with the Communications team and VP Admin to establish an action plan in connecting the board and students.

REVIEW OF THE EDUCATION TEAM

I believe that a review of the structure of the education team would be an asset to the organization and the education team. The MSU and McMaster have experienced many challenges and changes throughout the past two years so it is important to review if the education team has any inefficiencies or areas of growth that could allow the education team to optimize and become more effective. This could mean restructuring current positions, the removal or positions, or addition of positions. This would be done after consultation with the SRA, students, and the VP Admin.



THANK YOU

