

# Students at McGill, UofT, UBC Pass Pro-Palestine Policies

 [mcgilldaily.com/2022/04/students-at-mcgill-uoft-ubc-pass-pro-palestine-policies/](https://mcgilldaily.com/2022/04/students-at-mcgill-uoft-ubc-pass-pro-palestine-policies/)

By Abigail Popple

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Over the past month, student unions at a handful of major Canadian universities have established pro-Palestine policies, often to the chagrin of university administrators. While such policies are passed in student-led, democratic forums, administrators at these universities have attempted to intervene in student affairs on the grounds that advocating for divestment from companies complicit in Israeli apartheid will lead to divisiveness and discrimination within university communities. In light of this, the *Daily* examined administrators' responses to pro-Palestine policies recently passed in student unions at McGill, the University of Toronto (UofT), and the University of British Columbia (UBC).

## McGill University

The history of pro-Palestine policies within SSMU is a tumultuous one: in the Winter 2016 General Assembly (GA), a [motion](#) mandating SSMU's support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement was passed in the initial round of voting, only to [fail](#) the subsequent online ratification process. Following the nullification of this motion, an anonymous student filed a Judicial Board (JBoard) [petition](#) inquiring into its constitutionality; in May of 2016, the JBoard came to the unanimous decision that "all motions which compel SSMU to actively campaign against specific countries are unconstitutional" – including motions in support of BDS. Despite this, Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights (SPHR) McGill has continued to campaign for divestment from corporations complicit in settler-colonial apartheid against Palestinians; the passage of the [Palestine Solidarity Policy](#) (PSP) in SSMU's Winter 2022 Referendum was to be their latest victory.

The Policy had initially been absent from the referendum ballot following a notice from Elections SSMU that the JBoard issued an interim order prohibiting the PSP from being placed on the ballot "until such time a legal determination [could] be made," per a March 13 email sent from Elections SSMU to Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights McGill (SPHR). The following afternoon, Elections SSMU issued a statement explaining that the referendum ballot was "declared faulty and incomplete" – when the ballot was re-issued on Tuesday, March 15, the PSP was present, and later passed with [71.1 per cent of votes in favour](#).

The PSP, which SPHR described as "historic," outlines nine action items, including the mandates that: 1) SSMU campaign for McGill to condemn Canary Mission and other surveillance campaigns against Palestinian and pro-Palestine students; 2) SSMU boycott "corporations and institutions complicit in settler-colonial apartheid against Palestinians," and advocate for McGill to do so as well; and 3) SSMU establish a Palestine Solidarity

Committee. In their statement regarding the passage of the PSP, SPHR observed that “Time and time again, [Palestinian students’] activism has been met with censorship, blacklisting, and repression from an openly hostile McGill Administration” over the past two decades of pro-Palestine advocacy at McGill.

As if on cue, the PSP was met with strong opposition from McGill Administration just three days later: on Thursday, March 24, Deputy Provost Fabrice Labeau issued an email with the subject line “SSMU referendum outcome” via the Media Relations Office (MRO). Labeau expressed disappointment in the policy – which he said “calls for several actions that echo key tenets” of the BDS Movement, although the PSP makes no mention of BDS – referencing the recent development of the “Initiative to Prevent Anti-Semitism [sic] and Islamophobia.” He continued that initiatives like the PSP “create excessive polarization in our community” and are “in contradiction with the principles expressed by SSMU in its own constitution.” The *Daily* asked the MRO whether Labeau had any student testimonials or data verifying the claim that the PSP would divide the McGill community; the university did not provide evidence substantiating this claim. In response to the *Daily*’s inquiry as to which specific part of the SSMU constitution was violated, McGill merely repeated that initiatives like the PSP are “in contradiction with the principles expressed by SSMU in its own constitution.”

Labeau also said that the university had “communicated [his] concerns to the SSMU leadership and advised them to take [...] remedial action,” and divulged that the university is prepared to terminate its Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with SSMU. According to Article 12 of the MoA, the University may default the MoA “when the Association [i.e., SSMU] violates its constitution;” SSMU would be given 30 working days to remedy the default in the event of this happening. However, 2019-2020 SSMU President Bryan Buraga emailed SSMU Directors, Councillors, and Executives just under two hours after Labeau sent his MRO to explain that a default would not enable the university to “unilaterally dissolve the SSMU.” Buraga pointed out that in accordance with Article 12.3 of the MoA, SSMU could dispute arbitration within 90 days of receiving notice of the default. Furthermore, Articles 13.2 and 13.3 of the MoA and Sections 53 and 55 of the Act respecting the accreditation and financing of students’ associations mandate McGill to collect and distribute SSMU funds – termination of the MoA would make SSMU’s financial processes more cumbersome, but would not pose an existential threat to the Society, per Buraga.

According to current SSMU President Darshan Daryanani, McGill did not communicate its disapproval of the Policy prior to providing the Notice of Default: “The McGill Administration failed to engage with the SSMU with more consideration for the democratic and constitutional values of the Society,” Daryanani wrote in an email to the *Daily*. The statement sent to the *Daily* by the MRO says that the university “has communicated [its] concerns to the SSMU leadership,” but does not specify whether the university reached out to SSMU regarding the PSP prior to threatening a notice of default. Per Daryanani, Labeau’s Notice of Default states that “in no way can [the PSP] be considered to ‘facilitate communication and

interaction between all students from all McGill communities' or to 'act in the best interests of [SSMU's] Members as a whole.' It will also clearly lead to discrimination based on characteristics such as race, national or ethnic origin, and religion." Daryanani does not appear to believe that the PSP violates SSMU's Constitution, writing that it is the constitutional obligation of student representatives "to uphold matters of human rights, environmental protection and social justice."

During the March 24 Legislative Council meeting, Councillors passed the "[Motion Regarding Statement by SSMU in Response to MRO 2022-03-24](#)," which mandates SSMU to draft a public response to Labeau's MRO as swiftly as possible. Arts Representative Yara Coussa, who told the *Daily* she is advocating for SSMU to contest the Notice of Default, is leading this initiative. Daryanani said that SSMU's response is set to be released on April 5, pending approval from SSMU's legal counsel.

*Our top priority is ensuring the wellbeing of our students, faculty and staff and the maintenance of peaceful and constructive dialogue and engagement across our campus. Robust debate is key to what we do and who we are as a University. But such debate cannot be carried out at the expense of respect and inclusion. Policies and initiatives that make members of our community feel unwelcome or rejected on our campuses do not contribute to the advancement of our mission.*

*Initiatives that create excessive polarization in our community and encourage a culture of ostracization due to students' identity, religious or political beliefs, are in contradiction with the University's values of inclusion, diversity, and respect. In addition, they are also in contradiction with the principles expressed by SSMU in its own constitution and is expected to act in the best interests of all its student members. McGill University has communicated these concerns to the SSMU leadership and advised them to take prompt and appropriate remedial action, consistent with SSMU's obligations under its Memorandum of Agreement with the University.*

*Our efforts to sustain an open and inclusive university community are necessarily ongoing and concern us all. To this end, the University has tasked Professors Angela Campbell, Associate Provost (Equity and Academic Policies), and Fabrice Labeau, Deputy Provost (Student Life & Learning), with developing an initiative to address and prevent anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on our campuses. To ensure that this work results in concrete, meaningful actions, Professors Campbell and Labeau will consult with stakeholder groups within and beyond the McGill community. Our University is a place of learning, of civil inquiry, of rigorous engagement and discussion. These are essential tools for understanding contested ideas and will serve us well as we address and prevent Islamophobia and anti-Semitism on our campuses.*

Abigail Popple The university's response to the *Daily* largely repeats Labeau's March 24 email.

## University of Toronto

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The [University of Toronto Students' Union \(UTSU\)](#) has likewise had its controversies surrounding pro-BDS initiatives. In July of 2015, the UTSU Board of Directors (BoD) voted against the formation of a BDS committee, as [reported](#) in *The Varsity*. More recently, on

February 16, the UTSU approved a motion to divest from firms complicit in the occupation of Palestinian territory following a lengthy and heated debate. Afterwards, the UTSU released a statement affirming that they would support Palestinian students “in a manner that unequivocally condemns anti-Semitism [*sic*], Islamophobia, and systemic oppression in all its forms.” According to this statement, the Special General Meeting wherein the motion was passed was meant to clear up “what precisely was meant by the terms used in the motion,” but there was not an opportunity to do so – as such, how the motion will impact UofT students remains to be seen.

On February 16, the University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union (UTGSU) voted to reject recommendations made by UofT’s Complaint and Resolution Council for Student Societies (CRCSS) regarding the Union’s BDS caucus. In February of 2021, the CRCSS reviewed the caucus due to allegations of antisemitism and found that it violated the Union’s Anti-Discrimination Policy “on the grounds of discrimination based on nationality.” In a statement to the *Daily*, the UTGSU wrote that it “believes that the caucus is not discriminatory, but rather that it calls for equity through activism to support Palestinians who are facing oppression.” Furthermore, the Union contends that the CRCSS itself is undemocratic, writing that it was created “to infringe upon student union autonomy without the consent of the UTGSU.”

In response to the UTGSU’s rejection of the CRCSS recommendations, UofT decided to withhold student fees allocated to the BDS caucus – \$10,918 total, according to a news article which UofT sent the *Daily*. Per the UTGSU, the consequences of withholding these fees will likely not be felt until the summer semester, but “it sets a dangerous precedent [...] for universities to overrule democratically-decided student union decisions that they don’t like.” The UTGSU is working to strengthen solidarity among student unions, and encouraged McGill’s student unions to join the Global Student Government coalition in its email to the *Daily*. “A divided student movement makes it easier for university administrations to infringe upon student union autonomy and weaken the student voice. We cannot afford to be isolationist,” the Union explained.

## **University of British Columbia**

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On March 23, the Alma Mater Society (AMS) Council voted “yes” to a motion mandating the Council to “urge [UBC] to divest from companies involved in or complicit in human rights violations against Palestinians.” AMS declined to respond to the *Daily*’s request for comment; the *Daily* also reached out to the UBC chapter of SPHR, but did not receive a response.

In an email statement to the *Daily*, UBC wrote that the university “does not invest directly in individual stocks or companies,” instead investing in “pooled funds and external fund managers” in accordance with principles “based on the United Nations-supported Principles for Responsible Investment.” However, the statement continues to explain that “the aggregate exposure of the Endowment Portfolio to the names cited in the motion on the UN

database was approximately \$43,000, or 0.002% of the portfolio as of December 31, 2021. Including the full list of companies cited in the motion, the Endowment's aggregate exposure was less than 0.05%, or approximately \$1 million." As of writing, UBC has not attempted to intervene in the AMS decision; the university did not express any intention to interfere with the Society in its statement to the *Daily*.

## Broader Trends

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Michael Bueckert, Vice President at Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), wrote that there has been a "renewed momentum" in pro-Palestine activism on university campuses within the last year, pointing to the policies recently passed at McGill, Concordia, UofT, and UBC. Universities have historically repressed pro-Palestine activism, per Bueckert – for example, when Israeli Apartheid Week was brand new, administrators "bann[ed] event posters and [shut] down organizers." Bueckert explained that such repression had seemed to subside, but there has recently been increased interference in student activism – "with a resurgence of activism, it's not surprising to see a new wave of efforts to shut it down," he observed.

Communications Lead for Independent Jewish Voices, Aaron Lakoff, echoed these concerns in an interview with the *Daily*. "It's absolutely abhorrent when university administrations take these kinds of punitive actions," Lakoff said, adding that universities should be celebrating vibrant student democracies and the presence of anti-racist movements on their campuses. Of McGill and UofT's response to pro-Palestine activism on their respective campuses, Lakoff remarked, "Who is the one guilty of the divisive atmosphere when you are threatening a democratic student body and democratically-made decisions?"

Still, Bueckert and Lakoff both emphasized that students have an important role to play in anti-racist and anti-apartheid efforts. In 1985, McGill divested from its holdings in apartheid South Africa in response to student pressure; per Bueckert, student initiatives at the time included "establishing apartheid-free zones, protesting speeches by ambassadors, and implementing general anti-apartheid policies" on McGill's campus. Likewise, Lakoff pointed out that institutions like McGill are often complicit in Israeli apartheid due to their investments in companies which profit on occupied Palestinian land – as such, "students should never underestimate the powerful and important role they can play in terms of bringing down apartheid."

Lakoff, who is himself Jewish, said that alleging motions such as the PSP are antisemitic "ignores the fact that there are Jews all around the world [...] who are standing in solidarity with the Palestinian people." He also pointed out that universities should make an effort to protect Palestinian students from racism: if universities want to create a culture of inclusion, respect, and safety, they must consider "the safety of people of colour and Palestinian students who are attending a university that is complicit in their own people's dispossession and complicit in apartheid."

Bueckert and Lakoff also expressed concern for the well-being of student democracies at the hands of administrators willing to interfere in student politics. “The fact that universities are using [financial] threats specifically to try to shut down anti-racist organizing is appalling,” Bueckert wrote, describing UofT and McGill’s behaviour as “anti-democratic and heavy-handed.” Similarly, Lakoff characterized these universities’ punitive actions as “abhorrent,” adding that these actions are “threats against student democracy and threats against the wellbeing of students and campus life.”

The *Daily* inquired as to why McGill chose to default its MoA with SSMU as opposed to another course of action; the university did not address this question in its statement to the *Daily*. Additionally, the *Daily* asked what Labeau feels would be an appropriate way to “address serious and important questions” such as the PSP – the university’s response only reiterates that “robust debate is key to what we do and who we are as a University.”

Affairs related to the PSP are still developing as SSMU prepares its response to the Notice of Default; the *Daily* will continue to follow this story.