



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of approximately 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

POLICY BRIEF: STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY INCLUSION

OUSA believes that all willing and qualified students should have access to affordable, accountable, and high quality education in Ontario. This extends to all students, including those with disabilities or perceived disabilities. However, students with disabilities continue to face barriers to accessing and persisting in post-secondary education and many of the barriers these students face are not new.

THE PROBLEM

Isolating Campus Environments

Campus environments play a critical role in accessible education, but students are concerned about both social and physical barriers they face. Specifically, students are concerned about the lack of training required to educate students leaders, staff, and faculty in accessibility and inclusion: There are no provincial requirements in place mandating training on creating accessible campus environments for student leaders in volunteer positions; instructors and teaching assistants are often not trained on how to provide accommodations to students with disabilities or on navigating support services; there is no mandate for accessibility training for instructors, staff, and teaching assistants; and existing training modules are not required to include information on accommodation rights. Students are also concerned about the physical barriers that continue to make university campuses unnavigable for many students, particularly those with functional limitations: students with disabilities have a difficult time accessing parking on university campuses as not all parking lots on university campuses have designated accessible parking spots; older buildings on university campuses are not wholly accessible; accessibility ramps are often difficult to access; many lecture halls only have reserved accessible seating at the back of the room; and there are a limited number of barrier-free/universal washrooms on campuses and existing ones are often farther away from general spaces and difficult to access.

Barriers to Transition

Another important component of post-secondary education are the transitions into and out of university. These transitions play a significant role in student success and their ability to contribute to the workforce. However, students are concerned that information on all disability services and documentation requirements are not effectively communicated.

For example, students are often unaware of the requirements for psychosocial assessments. Without effective transition information, students who develop a disability during their post-secondary education may not identify that they could qualify for accommodations. Yet, the information provided in summer transition programming is inconsistent, as generalized summer transition programs insufficiently inform on accessibility services and supports. Additionally, students may not attend transition programs and therefore miss out on this information.

As they prepare to transition from post-secondary into the workforce, students are concerned that those with disabilities do not have sufficient opportunities to build their career-related experience. This is, in part, due to functional limitations but is also a result of social barriers and stigma: Students may choose to work in a part-time position where they are sure their accommodation needs will be met rather than choosing to start a new full-time position; there is limited knowledge of how, when, or if to disclose a disability to a potential employer; and students with visible disabilities face barriers to acquiring a job earlier on in the process.

Ineffective Support Services

While studying, students require a range of support services, and students with disabilities often face barriers to accessing effective support services. Students are specifically concerned that faculty and staff may not be equipped with the proper training to support academic accommodations. They are further concerned about the variability in documentation requirements between institutions which can limit students from accessing their choice of institution. Centralized bodies like the Inter-university Disability Issues Association (IDIA) do not have sufficient resources to research new models for accessibility.

Students are also concerned about some of the structures that guide support services. They are concerned that not every institution holds an independent review process for appeals for accommodations. They are concerned about the limitations of the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) definition of disability. Students are concerned that mental health services may not take into account the unique lived experiences and functional limitations of students with disabilities, and that these services are not always easily accessible to persons with disabilities.

Students are also concerned about the financial costs of support services, recognizing that post-secondary institutions may not have sufficient funds available for assistive technologies and that they are often expensive for individual students. Additionally, students registered with accessibility offices who are pursuing certificates rather than degrees receive accommodations but are not considered when the MCU determines funding for accessibility offices.

Barriers to Academic Accommodations

While students are asking for accessible post-secondary education, there will be cases where accommodations will still be required. However, students are concerned about the barriers to receiving accommodations. For example, students may be denied access to accommodations due to faculties' concerns about protecting intellectual property. Students are concerned that post-secondary accessibility policies lack a consistent review process, that accommodation policies and their implementation vary across institutions, and that province-wide documentation standards in the area of mental health are not reviewed in an adequate and timely manner.

Students are concerned about the standards surrounding the resubmission of disability documentation. Students who have unique circumstances often experience additional barriers when accessing documentation requirements, on top of the fact that institutions may not recognize or understand all disabilities and therefore may not be equipped to provide the necessary academic accommodations. Students with disabilities have a greater chance of facing intense academic strain which may be further compounded by them having to navigate the administrative process, especially when they are not provided with necessary and/or proper information. Students often experience hurdles when seeking access to the academic accommodations and these barriers create delays which can severely hinder a student's ability to succeed.

Financial Barriers

Students with disabilities also face financial barriers that are unique to their experiences. For example, there are high costs associated with acquiring psychological assessments. Students are concerned that a disproportionate number of students living with a disability borrow from private lenders.

Ineffective Legislation

Finally, while the province currently has accessibility legislation, namely the AODA, this legislation has not effectively changed the accessibility for post-secondary education in Ontario. In fact, less than half of organizations in Ontario are AODA-compliant and students are concerned that many buildings continue to be inaccessible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving Campus Environments

In order to ensure students are not faced with social barriers and stigma on campus, MCU should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) with developing a comprehensive Accessible Education Training best practices guideline and should partner with the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) to develop a set of modules for faculty on disability accommodations and accessibility. The provincial government should work with OCUFA to ensure they provide their members with standardized training and best practices, and amend the Occupational Health and Safety Act to include that all volunteer positions that will interact with individuals with a disability be required to complete AODA training.

To address physical barriers on campuses, the provincial government should: allocate capital funds to universities to create accessible parking spots on campus; amend section 80.33 of the AODA to require post-secondary institutions with multiple off-street parking facilities to evenly distribute accessible parking spaces on campus; provide envelope funding to institutions to retrofit existing infrastructure to comply with and go beyond AODA standards; provide envelope funding to universities' deferred maintenance budgets for the implementation of repairs and enhancements to campus pathways, classrooms, and buildings; and provide institutions with envelope funding to increase the number of barrier-free/universal washrooms on university campuses.

The MCU can support in this goal by: mandating that institutions have accessibility information on their website; encouraging post-secondary institutions when undergoing renovations or building new infrastructure on campus, to go above and beyond AODA standards; and encouraging institutions to ensure that washrooms are in an accessible location.

Supporting Transitions

The provincial government also has a role to play in supporting students as they transition into and out of post-secondary education. Students believe that the Ministry of Education and MCU should work together to amend the secondary school curriculum to provide high school students with knowledge of assessment

and documentation requirements and that some demanding programs can still be accommodated at the post-secondary level. MCU should also help students navigate the process of getting medically recognized and emphasize the value of interim documentation of functional limitations. The provincial government should require general summer transition programs supported by government funding to integrate information on accessibility services and accommodation for all students. MCU should further mandate that all universities make specific transition services available for incoming students with disabilities.

To support students as they transition into employment, the provincial government should: task HEQCO with researching best practices for transition programs for students with disabilities; expand Employment Ontario by adding combined disability youth incentives and support; provide funding to institutions for the training of an existing career consultant or a career consultant specifically dedicated to supporting students with disabilities; and make work integrated learning opportunities available for students with disabilities.

Strengthening Support Services

Students are also asking for stronger and more effective support services on their campuses. The provincial government can support this ask by providing funding to the IDIA to conduct research on standards of practice providing supports to students with disabilities and working with the IDIA to develop standard documentation for admissions applications. Further, MCU should task the HEQCO with creating a standard to evaluate the effectiveness of accessibility services at post-secondary institutions as well as for the appropriate amount of funding for accessibility offices. This would be strengthened by a mandate that institutions have an independent body to review complaints and a formal definition from the OHRC that describes individuals with temporary or semi-permanent disabilities. Additionally, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care should develop best practices for a “whole of community approach”.

The provincial government should provide additional envelope funding through the Accessibility Fund for Students with Disabilities to secure assistive technologies for students and additional accessibility support services, as well as funding for institutions to cover the costs of assistive technologies on behalf of students. Additionally, MCU should include the total number of students when calculating how much funding accessibility offices receive.

Improving Academic Accommodations

Students ask the provincial government to mandate that universities review their academic accommodations policy every five years. The provincial government can support this by conducting a review of existing academic accommodation standards. At the same time, the provincial government should task HEQCO with

conducting: a review of province-wide documentation standards in the area of mental health; a review of the current standards on disability documentation resubmission; a review of the assessment requirements for students seeking academic accommodations based on a learning disability and/or ADHD; and an investigation into best practices in academic accommodation processes.

To ensure students see the full benefits of these reviews, the provincial government should mandate that the standards and guidelines for province-wide documentation are being enforced equitably across all institutions; that accessibility services utilize the best practices provided by HEQCO in the training of instructors and staff; that universities' accommodation policies are aligned with the OHRC's *Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities*; and that a standardized interim accommodation process be implemented. Students also believe that province-wide documentation standards should not require students with registered permanent disabilities to seek additional forms of documentation and the Ontario Health Insurance Program should be expanded to include the cost of medical notes.

Addressing Financial Barriers

The provincial government should also address the financial barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing post-secondary education. To this end, the OHRC should create a formal definition for temporary disabilities that the MCU should adopt. The provincial government should lobby the federal government to expand the eligibility criteria to include students with temporary disabilities and to expand the diagnostic assessment limitation under the Canada Student Grant for Persons with Disabilities to cover the costs of psychological assessments in their entirety.

The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) also requires improvements. Specifically, eligibility requirements should be amended to ensure that students who have a temporary disability, who are taking a reduced course load, are still eligible for full-time OSAP funding; reviewed to ensure that the regulations adopt an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion lens; and OSAP academic probation and restriction penalties should take into account the functional limitations and lived experience of students with a disability.

Strengthening Accessibility Legislation

Finally, the provincial government can strengthen their commitment to accessibility in the province by conducting a review of AODA compliance and strengthen future iterations using a phased approach; and reassessing the AODA and creating an updated document as to where organizations should be moving towards within the next 20 years. In the meantime, they should work with post-secondary institutions to ensure that all existing and future buildings are compliant with the AODA and the Building Code Act.