

POLICY BRIEF: A COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS STRATEGY

All willing and qualified students should be able to pursue higher education in Ontario, yet some groups remain significantly underrepresented within the province's post-secondary institutions. To address this issue, the provincial government should create a comprehensive access strategy aimed at ensuring equitable access to post-secondary, flexible pathways to university, improved outreach programs, increased guidance in secondary schools, and more comprehensive data regarding access initiatives and post-secondary attainment.

THE PROBLEM

Absence of a Provincial Access Strategy

All willing and qualified individuals in Ontario should be able to access the province's post-secondary education system. However, certain groups in Ontario are underrepresented in post-secondary education and face unique barriers, not limited to finances, that restrict access for qualified individuals. The provincial government is not sufficiently committed to increasing access to post-secondary for underrepresented groups and remains focused on non-specifically increasing overall enrolment.

Inequitable Access for Students from Underrepresented Groups

Students from underrepresented groups must have equitable access to post-secondary education. Unfortunately, perceptions associated with these students' identities may cause them to select, or be encouraged to select, post-secondary pathways other than their preferred pathway. Existing support systems do not adequately address systemic barriers to accessing post-secondary education, and existing primary and secondary education systems may use a "one size fits all" approach that fails to support students from underrepresented groups.

There are also access concerns specific to particular underrepresented groups. Post-secondary institutions may inaccurately communicate their accommodations for students with disabilities, and perceptions of these students' abilities may lead to them not pursuing their preferred post-secondary pathway. Also of concern is the systemic oppression of racialized and Indigenous students that affects these students' ability to attend post-secondary. Further, students with reduced financial means may be unable to devote time to studying, pursuing extra-curricular activities, and taking other

steps that help in the pursuit of post-secondary. Finally, students living in rural and northern communities are disproportionately affected by poor internet access, resulting in fewer opportunities to learn about their post-secondary options.

Performance-based funding should be used to offer fair incentives to post-secondary institutions that increase student access among these and other underrepresented groups. However, current Strategic Mandate Agreements currently do not place adequate focus on access for marginalized student groups in institutional enrolment and differentiation strategies.

Inflexible Pathways to University

Mature students often have work or family obligations that make it more difficult to access post-secondary education. Those who opt for part-time studies in order to continue working or caring for dependents often do not qualify for particular grants or loans, and many do not have the financial support to return to school. Unfortunately, because the OSAP definition of mature students was recently changed from four years to six, many students are unable to access the financial aid they need. Further, students may lack the financial resources to transfer between post-secondary institutions, or they may be unaware of the process of transferring. Students from marginalized groups, in particular, often face additional barriers when attempting to transfer between post-secondary institutions, and often do not see university as a viable option for them.

Insufficient Outreach & Awareness

Students should feel empowered to choose educational programs that best suit their goals and abilities; however, students who have not completed secondary school often do not have the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education. Further, students who did

not complete the minimum university requirements in high school (i.e., grade twelve, university-level English) are unable to access university until six years after they graduate, when they qualify as mature students.

Extracurriculars can encourage students' interest in post-secondary education and help develop career and education goals. Unfortunately, these programs often have financial barriers that limit students' ability to participate in them. Lower-income parents, in particular, may be disadvantaged because they cannot afford to put young children in camps or other educational opportunities.

Finally, students should feel supported and knowledgeable about financial literacy so that they can make the decision best suited for them regarding post-secondary education. Often, however, information about financial aid arrives too late for prospective students to realize post-secondary education is an option for them. RESPs can also be inaccessible for lower-income families who do not have the ability to save money.

Lack of Support in Secondary School

The stigmatization associated with specific streams often pressures students to enroll in classes that are not the right fit for them, hindering their long-term academic and career success. In particular, students from marginalized or minority groups are often forced into the Applied stream, even when they may succeed more in the Academic stream. The difficulty of switching between streams acts as a barrier to students attending their post-secondary pathway of choice. In some cases, guidance counsellors do not have the training required to equip students with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision about their post-secondary pathway. Further, some secondary school students do not have sufficient access to resources that enable academic success and motivation to continue with education, and data shows that secondary school dropout rates are higher among groups that are underrepresented in post-secondary education.

Incomplete System Data & Information

Public policy interventions to support and broaden the accessibility of Ontario's universities should rely on comprehensive data that allows for patterns of marginalization to be scientifically identified and quantified. There is room for improvement in this area, and currently third-party groups are helping to fill data availability gaps. Due to a lack of information and longitudinal data, initiatives intended to increase access for underrepresented groups cannot always be consistently and thoroughly evaluated. Further, current data on student access is fragmented and not presented in a central location.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a Provincial Access Strategy

The provincial government should:

- Publicly commit to increasing access to post-secondary education for underrepresented groups and reducing barriers; and
- Developing a comprehensive strategic plan that addresses the unique needs of different underrepresented groups.

Increase Access for Students from Underrepresented Groups

The provincial government should:

- Provide targeted programming that prepares and encourages students from underrepresented groups to pursue their preferred post-secondary pathway;
- Commission research on how to modify primary and secondary education systems to improve access to post-secondary for underrepresented groups;
- Implement debt reduction mechanisms and specific streams of OSAP to support students from underrepresented groups;
- Invest in addressing the systemic oppression which contributes to students from certain groups being underrepresented in post-secondary education;
- Invest in an evidence-based, comprehensive framework for students with disabilities which prioritizes their learning needs without limiting their options for post-secondary pathways;
- Provide grant funding for modifying physical infrastructure and academic processes to meet students' accessibility needs;
- Develop a system for independently evaluating and verifying accessibility supports at post-secondary institutions and presenting this information in a central location;
- Review the effectiveness of programming and support for students with disabilities to ensure a focus on resiliency and skill development;
- Invest in addressing the systemic oppression of racialized and Indigenous folk in order to improve their educational outcomes;
- Support Indigenous communities by investing in specific enrichment programs during primary and secondary education aimed at increasing students' ability to attend their preferred post-secondary pathway;
- Develop guidelines so that universities can uniformly consider extenuating circumstances in admissions decisions;
- Invest in funding streams for schools in neighbourhoods with lower socioeconomic status in order to create a high-quality learning environment for students;

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- Invest in targeted enrichment programs which aim to build lifelong learning skills for students with lower socioeconomic status;
 - Introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant designed to allocate funding to students to cover travel costs from their place of permanent residence to the nearest institution offering their program of choice;
 - Provide funding to the Ontario University Registrars' Association, the Council of Ontario Universities, and the Ontario Universities' Application Centre to ensure that Ontario universities' Regional Fairs reach rural and northern communities with low post-secondary attainment rates;
 - Continue and expand upon the Enrolment Strategy section in the next iteration of Strategic Mandate Agreements;
 - Adopt a policy of moderate differentiation and specialization in improving student access, encouraging both general commitments to access and specific institutional areas of strength;
 - Explore using the per-student availability of specialized scholarship funding geared toward specialized areas of student access as an indicator in future performance-based funding;
 - Implement an indicator for performance-based funding based on the provision of services which specifically support students from underrepresented groups; and
 - Create a new student access stream of operating grants under the differentiation envelope, to be strategically distributed to institutions which set and meet ambitious and meaningful student access targets through their Strategic Mandate Agreements;
- Collaborate with HEQCO to collect data on the long-term outcomes of outreach programs in Ontario;
 - Develop a grant for elementary schools to apply to in order to further support extracurriculars;
 - Develop a needs-based grant to help children in K-12 attend camps and after-school programming focused on developing an interest in education;
 - Develop a grant that elementary schools can apply to in order to visit post-secondary institutions on field trips;
 - Invest in further advertisement about financial aid to prospective students and their support systems, including a centralized database of all scholarship offerings within Ontario;
 - Develop an additional program for the Canada Learning Bond that invests an additional \$250 per year for every eligible child; and
 - Develop a free online financial literacy course for adults and young adults focused on saving for post-secondary education

The Ministry of Education should:

- Renew funding for the Ontario Post-Secondary Access and Inclusion Program (OPAIP) so that post-secondary institutions can continue to use it to deliver enhanced outreach, access, transition, and retention for students.

Improve Secondary School Supports

The Ministry of Education should:

- Mandate that decisions between university and college streams be postponed to grades 11 and 12, and that school boards implement a strategic plan dedicated to a thorough explanation of these streams and the post-secondary pathways to which they lead;
- Implement a reassessment tool to give students and parents and/or guardians a formal opportunity to re-evaluate their options and make switching between streams more accessible;
- Regularly consult students and teachers at the secondary and post-secondary level and collect data to monitor the effectiveness of recent changes to the Grade Ten Career Studies curriculum;
- Upon postponing streaming decisions to grades 11 and 12, amend the Career Studies course curriculum to include a section on the outcomes of streaming decisions;
- Provide resources on how to pursue post-secondary education, without prioritizing one form of post-secondary over another;
- Evaluate and conduct a review of the ratio of guidance counsellors to students served; and
- Ensure that all guidance counsellors have the proper training in academic success through their Additional Qualifications courses, with an option to specialize in matters related to post-secondary education and mental health

The Ministry of Education should:

- Create a Rural and Northern Education Strategy aimed at addressing specific barriers faced by these students.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) should:

- Collaborate with existing disability stakeholders to research and develop a comprehensive framework for increasing access for students with disabilities, including how to support students with visible and non-visible disabilities.

Promote Alternative Pathways to University

The provincial government should:

- Work with Pathways to Education to create outreach programs aimed at people who do not have their high school diploma or GED but wish to pursue further education;
- Develop a grant for universities to apply to that would allow them to develop outreach programs for students who: do not have these qualifications; did not complete the minimum university requirements, despite graduating high school; and/or are a member of one or more underrepresented groups;

The provincial government should:

- Provide envelope funding so that school boards can hire teaching staff to develop in-school tutoring centres; and
- Provide funding to the Pathways to Education program to allow for the expansion of mentorship and support programs and permit a wider reach to underrepresented populations.

Expand System Data & Information

The provincial government should:

- Convene a multi-stakeholder expert panel to examine and make recommendations regarding the collection, availability, accessibility, and publication of post-secondary data in Ontario;
- Task this expert panel with creating a framework for a common university reporting standard for demographic data on student applications, offers, acceptances, retention, and success;
- Establish, upon the advice of this expert panel, robust metrics for access that should be tracked on a longitudinal basis at both the institutional and provincial levels;
- Collect self-identified data on access to post-secondary education on all relevant protected grounds under the Ontario Human Rights Code;
- Amend the Ontario Education Number (OEN) to include, from consenting individuals, important demographic information necessary to further the goals of a comprehensive access strategy; and
- At least every three years, produce a report with aggregate data on student access to the post-secondary system, both for public consumption and for use in guiding the Post-Secondary Comprehensive Access Strategy.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please refer to OUSA's policy paper titled "A Comprehensive Access Strategy" published in November 2020.