



OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

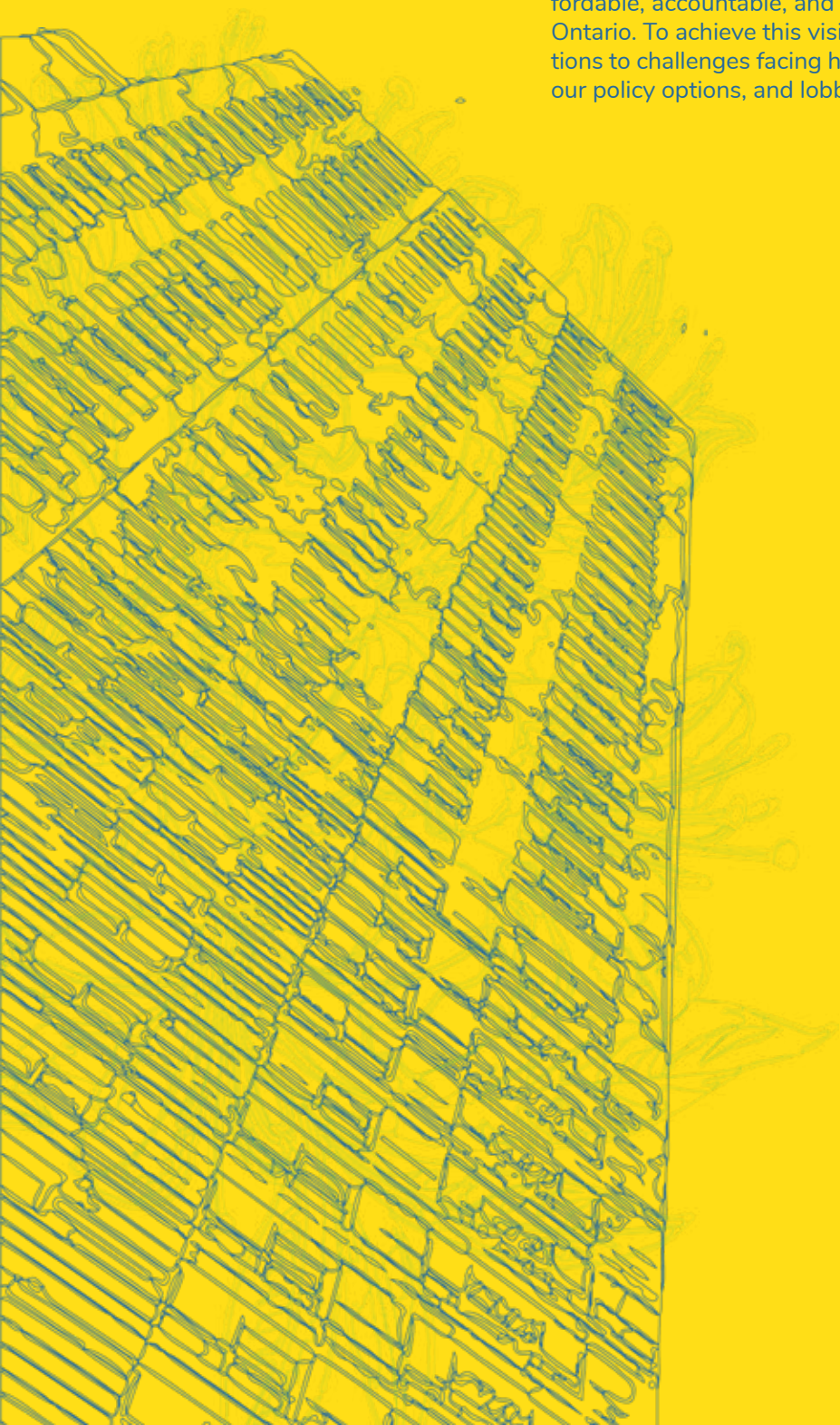


2022

pre-budget submission

about OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.



summary of RECOMMENDATIONS

INVESTMENTS

To increase affordability, the provincial government should immediately reinstate the moratorium on OSAP payments and interest accrual – following the reinstatement of the OSAP moratorium the provincial government should introduce a permanent, two-year grace period after graduation to ensure recent graduates are in the financial position to cover payments of interest.

To increase affordability, the provincial government should stop OSAP clawbacks as a result of increased federal funding through Canada Student Grants and invest any savings generated by these clawbacks into OSAP to provide more direct support for students who need it most.

To support student mental health, the provincial government should provide funding for community-based mental health care providers to supply culturally relevant and diverse counselling and support groups for post-secondary students.


To provide better services to survivors of gender-based violence, the provincial government should provide grant funding to community sexual health clinics to work with post-secondary institutions to provide students with resources and information about local supports, as well as enhancing infrastructure and referral systems.

RED-TAPE REDUCTION AND NON-FINANCIAL COMMITMENTS

To reduce unnecessary barriers for students with disabilities, the provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions cannot require a student to be re-diagnosed with a disability where the medical practitioner believes the student's needs will not change; and that the province-wide documentation standards do not require students with registered permanent disabilities to seek additional forms of documentation, such as doctor's notes.

To proactively address sexual and gender-based violence on post-secondary campuses, the Ministry of Education should include sexual health in all subject areas of the K-12 curricula and, specifically, amend the Health and Physical Education curriculum to include lessons on gender identity, consent, sexual orientation, masturbation and sexual pleasure, STIs, pregnancy and contraception, gender norms, toxic masculinity, and technology-facilitated violence.





New message

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From Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

To The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance

Re: OUSA Written Submission to 2022 Budget Consultations

Dear Mr. Bethlenfalvy,

Please accept this submission on behalf of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). OUSA represents the interests of over 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight institutions across Ontario. We believe in a well-funded, high-quality, accountable, and accessible post-secondary system for students in our province.

As Ontario enters its third calendar year of living with COVID-19, post-secondary students continue to struggle. At this point, students have experienced every iteration of online learning, hybrid classrooms, and virtual university. Over the last two years, students have noted that many pre-existing concerns have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including the lack of direct financial aid for students, challenges maintaining their mental health, and limited support services to students in need. We are hopeful the Ontario government will accept OUSA's recommendations to provide direct support to university students. Students and recent graduates will play an important role in the post-pandemic recovery and in order to do so, the government should ensure they are adequately supported for sustainable and successful outcomes.

Increasing Affordability

Every year, students' top concern is the affordability of post-secondary education. Students struggle to afford tuition, housing, and textbooks, and the amount of financial aid available to them remains limited. Two years into COVID-19, students continue to face challenges in finding summer and part-time employment to help them finance their university education.

Data from our 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey (OUSS), with a sample size of 5,697, found that 61% of respondents were "very" or "somewhat" concerned about having enough money to complete their education and among these respondents, 47% attributed this to the reduced OSAP funding they received.¹ This issue becomes increasingly worrisome when considering impacts to student employment. When surveyed in 2020, 46% of respondents stated their top reason for summer employment was to earn money to pay for school, and yet, 40% did not have a paying job over the summer.² This signals a significant loss of income that would have been dedicated to financing their education. COVID-19 played a critical role in this as 37% cited the pandemic as their reason for not looking for work.³ Consequently, changes to OSAP and COVID-19 have disrupted students' financial plans.

To increase affordability, OUSA recommends:

- 1) The provincial government should immediately reinstate the moratorium on OSAP payments and interest accrual. In the long-term, the provincial government should introduce a permanent, two-year grace period after graduation.

At the beginning of the pandemic, all levels of government came together to support Canadians who were struggling with unemployment and a tough job market. To support recent graduates, one of the first actions taken by both federal and provincial governments was to pause interest accrual and student loan repayments until September 30th, 2020. Unfortunately, in January of 2022, COVID-19 continues to impact the economy and we now have fewer financial supports available. This is why the provincial government should immediately reinstate the moratorium on OSAP payments and interest accrual until the pandemic subsides. The federal government has already taken a positive step forward by extending the suspension of interest accrual on the federal portion of loans until March 31, 2023,⁴ and the province has an opportunity to follow suit.

OUSA recognizes that, even outside of a global pandemic, students are graduating with an extremely high debt load. On average, students in Ontario are graduating with \$30,000 in debt, and only 38% of them had paid it off 3 years after graduation.⁵ Therefore, OUSA recommends that the provincial government introduce a permanent, two-year grace period after graduation to ensure students are in a financial position to cover loan and interest payments. Data from the Ontario University Graduate Survey shows that 88% of graduates were employed six months after graduation while 94% were employed two years after.⁶ This indicates that two years after graduation, students are in a much better place financially and are ready to begin repaying their loans.

New message

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2) The provincial government should stop OSAP clawbacks as a result of increased federal funding through Canada Student Grants and invest any savings generated by these clawbacks into OSAP to provide more direct support for students who need it most.

In April 2020, the federal government doubled the Canada Student Grants (CSG) with the intention of supplementing provincial financial aid programs during the pandemic.⁷ However, in response, Ontario's 2021 fiscal outlook showed a \$400 million reduction in OSAP spending in 2020-21, meaning the provincial government clawed back their portion of OSAP spending and students did not feel the intended increase in student financial aid.⁸ This poses a serious concern for students as thousands rely on OSAP annually to help fund their education, and are consequently not reaping the benefits of increased federal aid. In April 2021, the federal government announced two additional years of increased funding to CSG. If the provincial government does not stop clawing back OSAP, the province will continue to use this increased federal funding as a cost-saving mechanism instead of helping students. Therefore, OUSA is asking the provincial government to stop OSAP clawbacks and that any savings generated from these clawbacks be reinvested into OSAP to provide targeted financial support to students.

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Inclusive Student Mental Health Services

It is abundantly clear that student mental health is a pressing issue with severe consequences to students' physical, social, and emotional well-being, academic achievement, retention, and overall livelihood. Students are a population group who face enormous pressures stemming from academic stress to post-graduation career prospects. While several one-time investments have been made into student mental health during the pandemic, it is vital that the intersectionality of students' identities are considered for a more holistic and comprehensive mental health care system.

To support student mental health, OUSA recommends:

- 1) The provincial government should provide funding for community-based mental health care providers to supply culturally relevant and diverse counselling and support groups for postsecondary students.

Campus health care services are not always inclusive, lack a culturally relevant approach, and do not often meet the needs of students from racialized and religiously-diverse backgrounds. Students have experienced implicit bias from on-campus providers and consequently, these services have become unsafe and inaccessible spaces for students. This is why students need off-campus service providers who reflect their lived experiences and can understand the nuances of these experiences. This is critical in supporting student health, as well as sustaining and retaining students in the pursuit of their post-secondary education.

“[Universities should] be more open to catering your mental health services to different cultures and various identities – mental health services should not be one-size-fits-all, but should be accommodating to all backgrounds.”¹⁴

Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Sexual and gender-based violence has been a long-standing crisis on post-secondary campuses, with students continuously voicing the need for stronger prevention and response measures. In Canada, 71% of students either witnessed or experienced sexual violence in a post-secondary environment.⁹ The harm that follows these incidents are life-changing, and students must have access to survivor-centric and trauma-informed resources that give space for healing and justice. Students deserve safety in the pursuit of their education, and steps can be taken to provide support both before and after these incidents.

To provide better services to survivors of gender-based violence and proactively address sexual and gender-based violence on post-secondary campuses, OUSA recommends:

1) The provincial government should provide grant funding to community sexual health clinics to work with post-secondary institutions to provide students with resources and information about local supports, as well as enhancing infrastructure and referral systems.

On-campus supports do not always provide the level of care needed to safely tend to the needs of survivors. As a result, students may not be comfortable accessing these services at a critical time in their healing process. An integrated model of care is essential to bridge community-based and campus resources in a way that is trauma-informed and mindful of survivors' experiences. Funding to community-based sexual health clinics can support this connection and facilitate outreach to students, increase awareness about external services, and offer low-barrier referral processes.

2) The Ministry of Education should include sexual health in all subject areas of the K-12 curricula and, specifically, amend the Health and Physical Education curriculum to include lessons on gender identity, consent, sexual orientation, masturbation and sexual pleasure, STIs, pregnancy and contraception, gender norms, toxic masculinity, and technology-facilitated violence.

Given that students are most at-risk for sexual violence within the initial 8 weeks of their first year, awareness and education on sexual health must be provided to children and youth before they enter post-secondary.¹⁰ The K-12 level provides an opportune time to build foundational knowledge on consent, safe and healthy relationships, gender, and sexuality. Enhancing and strengthening the K-12 curricula is a no-cost recommendation that would adequately equip youth with sustainable attitudes on sexual health, and contribute to a safer campus climate for all.

Supporting Students with Disabilities

The province's shift to a remote working model in response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates our ability to increase the accessibility of learning environments and provide accommodations for students based on their individual needs. Our response teaches us a new "normal" is possible where innovation and flexibility are exercised to promote inclusion. However, students with disabilities continue to face barriers when accessing and succeeding in university.

Access to accommodations is not only a legal requirement under the Ontario Human Rights Code, but is also integral to ensuring all students have equitable access to post-secondary education and employment.¹¹ However, students with disabilities are underrepresented in post-secondary education and employment post-graduation. Only 17% of Ontarians with a learning disability have a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 39% of Ontarians without a disability. Additionally, 16.7% of recent graduates with a disability are unemployed versus 6% of those without. In providing students with accommodations that meet their needs, students must be provided with a process free of undue hardships."¹²

To reduce unnecessary barriers for students with disabilities, OUSA recommends:

- 1) The provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions cannot require a student to be re-diagnosed with a disability where the medical practitioner believes the student's needs will not change; and that the province-wide documentation standards do not require students with registered permanent disabilities to seek additional forms of documentation, such as doctor's notes.

Institutions are responsible for ensuring that students are provided with accommodations that meet their needs. However, the documentation process has been proven to be inconsistent across post-secondary institutions, specifically regarding what documents are required, how documentation is assessed, and how recent the documents need to be in order to be accepted.¹³

There has been a growing concern among students, who received a diagnosis prior to turning 18, that they will need to be re-diagnosed as an adult to receive accommodations from their institution even though their needs have not changed. Requirements around documentation and diagnoses can disadvantage some students due to the financial, emotional, and procedural burdens that come with diagnoses. Eliminating re-diagnosis requirements will help alleviate the burdens faced by these students.

Furthermore, the documentation process for students with disabilities requires students to submit medical or doctors' notes as proof of functional limitations. This creates barriers for many low-income students. Students seeking accommodations directly related to their disabilities should not be required to pay the cost of a doctor or medical note. For students with registered permanent disabilities, additional documentation in the form of a doctor or medical note should not be required.

Sincerely,

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance |

Endnotes

- 1 Britney De Costa and Malika Dhanani. *Affordability: Results from the 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey*. Research Report. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2021.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Employment and Social Development Canada, “Budget 2021: Important announcements for student aid,” Government of Canada, December 2, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/notices/budget-student-aid.html>
- 5 Statistics Canada, “Table 37-10-0036-01 Student debt from all sources, by province of study and level of study,” Government of Canada, released November 5, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710003601>
- 6 Ministry of Colleges and Universities, “2019-20 Ontario University Graduate Survey,” Government of Ontario, 2021, <https://www.iaccess.gov.on.ca/OsappRatesWeb/enterapp/overview.xhtml>.
- 7 Government of Canada, *Budget 2021 A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience*, 2021, 108, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2021/home-accueil-en.html>
- 8 Peter Bethlenfalvy, *Ontario’s Action Plan: Protecting People’s Health and Our Economy* (Toronto, ON: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2021), 174, <https://budget.ontario.ca/2021/pdf/2021-ontario-budget-en.pdf>.
- 9 Marta Burczycka, “Students’ experiences of unwanted sexualized behaviours and sexual assault at postsecondary schools in the Canadian provinces, 2019,” *Juristat*, September 14, 2020, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00005-eng.htm>
- 10 *Campus Sexual Violence: Guidelines for a Comprehensive Response* (Vancouver, BC: Ending Violence Association of BC, 2016).
- 11 *Human Rights Code* 1990, c. H.19. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90h19>
- 12 Ken Chatoor, *Postsecondary Credential Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes for Ontario Students with Disabilities* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2021).
- 13 “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Transition Resource Guide for Students with Disabilities*, accessed January 19, 2022, <https://www.transition-resourceguide.ca/frequently-asked-questions> [Transition Resource Guide].
- 14 Student quote provided through the 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey.