

February 6, 2023

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy  
Minister of Finance  
c/o Budget Secretariat  
Frost Building North, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
95 Grosvenor Street  
Toronto, ON  
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CC:  
Deputy Minister Shannon Fuller  
Minister Jill Dunlop

RE: OUSA's Written Submission to 2023 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.

Between their finances, course content, and networking opportunities, students have faced several unique disruptions over the past couple of years that have collectively affected their post-secondary experience. As students have slowly transitioned back to in-person learning, many of their concerns have become increasingly worrisome as they seek to enjoy an affordable, safe, and accessible post-secondary education. In particular, students need support towards financing their education, addressing sexual and gender-based violence, and facilitating their transit and healthcare needs.

We are hopeful the Ontario government will accept the following recommendations from OUSA to strengthen the support provided to university students. Students have been, and will continue to be a critical part of our province's community and economy. As such, it is imperative that the provincial government enhance the resources offered to students and consequently, ensure them a well-rounded post-secondary experience.

### **Improving Affordability**

Affordability is a primary concern of many undergraduate students across Ontario, and yet, financial aid and tuition structures continue to impede the accessibility of post-secondary education. All willing and qualified students in Ontario, regardless of socioeconomic status, should have access to high-quality post-secondary education. Through the budget, the provincial government has an opportunity to expand financial access for all students studying in Ontario, and enact changes that directly benefit students.

### **To support post-secondary affordability, OUSA recommends:**

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| <p><b>1)</b> The provincial government extend its grace period for the provincial portion of OSAP to a minimum of two years to ensure that students are in the financial position to cover the cost of repayments.</p> |
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The provincial government provides a 6-month grace period on student loan repayment; however on average, recent graduates do not secure full-time employment in this timeframe. In fact, the 2020-21 Ontario University Graduate Survey (OUGS) found that 71% of graduates had obtained employment after 6 months, while 75% found employment 2 years after graduation.<sup>1</sup> This has been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic, with youth employment suffering the greatest losses.<sup>2</sup> The OUGS also reveals that students have a higher income 2 years after graduation rather than 6 months, with the former timestamp seeing most students earn between \$56,000-60,000 while the latter shows most students making \$36,000-40,000.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, graduates have better incomes as they progress in their career, making it more financially feasible to pay off their student loans. Providing a 2-year grace period would ensure young Ontarians have more time to find stable employment and save a sufficient amount of money to pay off their loan, consequently making them face less financial strain.

**2)** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities: (1) regulate international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of 5% per year to match institutionally set limitations, and (2) regulate in-cohort increases to international tuition at a maximum of 3% per year.

Unlike domestic tuition, increases to international fees are not capped under provincial policy. International students' fees are almost 6 times higher than their domestic counterparts, and post-secondary institutions rely on these unregulated fees as a main source of operational revenue.<sup>4</sup> In the event of a social, global, or political change in circumstance, international enrolment at Ontario's universities becomes threatened and consequently, so does institutional revenue. Thus, it is critical that regulations are put in place to control increases to international tuition that both limit institutions' reliance on these fees and encourage the provincial government to increase their operating grants, cultivating a more sustainable funding model for the post-secondary sector.

### **Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence**

Recent reports of sexual violence at Ontario universities are devastating, but not surprising. Gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) is pervasive at post-secondary institutions and the need for a comprehensive framework to prevent and respond to GBSV is long overdue. Everyone deserves to be able to safely pursue their education and all survivors should be supported in ways that allow them to seek justice and heal in meaningful ways.

#### **To proactively address sexual and gender-based violence, OUSA recommends:**

**3)** The provincial government collaborate with community experts, students, and institutions to improve the Student Voices on Sexual Violence Climate Survey (SVSVCS) for future implementation.

The SVSVCS was a 2018 province-wide survey administered to post-secondary students to gather their perspectives on sexual violence; prior to this, there was no provincial data collection tool of this kind.<sup>5</sup> The survey gathered valuable information, like the fact that 63.2% of university students had disclosed an experience of sexual harassment since the start of the school year.<sup>6</sup> However, the first SVSVCS did not include vital questions regarding student knowledge of and trust in laws related to gender-based and sexual violence, and omitted questions pertaining to adverse childhood experiences, a key factor in recidivism rates. Students and institutional staff can provide relevant insights into campus life and appropriate methods to engage their student bodies, and including these important stakeholders ensures new iterations of the survey do not exclude vital information. Additionally, working with community experts in future implementations of the survey will ensure that the SVSVCS follows

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Colleges and Universities, "2020-21 Ontario University Graduate Survey," *Government of Ontario*, accessed online: May 6, 2022, <https://www.iaccess.gov.on.ca/OsappRatesWeb/enterapp/overview.xhtml>

<sup>2</sup> "Labour Market Bulletin - Ontario: August 2022." Job Bank. Government of Canada / Gouvernement du Canada, September 29, 2022. <https://www.jobbank.gc.ca/trend-analysis/job-market-reports/ontario/bulletin>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Colleges and Universities, "2020-21 Ontario University Graduate Survey,"

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table: 37-10-0045-01 Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (current dollars)," *Government of Canada*, September 7, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710004501>

<sup>5</sup> "650,000+ Ontario Postsecondary Students Asked to Take Survey on Sexual Violence," *Council of Ontario Universities*, February 28, 2018, <https://cou.ca/articles/sexual-violence-survey/>

<sup>6</sup> "Student Voices on Sexual Violence," *Government of Ontario*, updated October 21, 2019, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/studentvoices-sexual-violence>

industry standards of trauma-informed, survivor-centric, and effective research practices. Investing in future distributions of the SVSVCS and using these funds to equitably compensate the aforementioned collaborators opens up access to further resources, tools, and knowledge that could not otherwise be acquired.

**4)** The provincial government amend section 17 of the *Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act* to require that post-secondary institutions participate in a gender-based and sexual violence campus climate survey every three years.

Data collected through climate surveys provides a central dataset to inform public reports as well as policy and operation decisions. By mandating the frequency of institutional engagement to three years, the province can ensure that there is consistent, up-to-date data regarding gender-based and sexual violence on campuses. Recurring data collection on a given issue ensures that the policy responses to address it are properly informed, enhancing the ability to propose and implement relevant cost-effective measures. This cyclical timeframe also coincides with the mandatory three year review of institutional sexual and gender-based violence policies, creating a timeline that holds institutions accountable to use this data in a manner that best serves their student populations. Over time, this data will allow the government, institutions, relevant stakeholders, community organizations, and front-line staff to monitor trends and effectiveness of institutional initiatives, and inherently, evaluate cost-savings mechanisms.

**5)** The Ministry of Education 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.

Students are most likely to face sexual or gender-based violence in the first 6-8 weeks of post-secondary education.<sup>7</sup> As such, it is important that students enter and begin post-secondary with prevention education, and has proven to be most effective if taught regularly and consistently.<sup>8</sup> By integrating sexual health in the K-12 curricula, it ensures students proactively gain knowledge of consent culture, healthy and safe relationships, sexuality, and identity, facilitated in a safe learning environment. Thus, integration at the K-12 level ensures that students enter post-secondary institutions with the foundational knowledge needed to make safe and healthy choices that both benefit them and help foster more positive campus environments.

### **Supporting Access to Transit and Healthcare Needs**

As active and valued members of Ontario's post-secondary community, rural and northern students deserve access to important services that enhance their university experience. The remoteness of these areas leave students in these communities under-resourced and without comprehensive access to services that contribute to their wellness. Limited transportation and healthcare options minimize opportunities for students to adequately embrace and engage with their communities, and sufficiently address their healthcare needs. Students should not have to sacrifice access to these critical daily resources when studying and living in a remote location, and deserve to fully participate in and enjoy their communities just as their urban counterparts do.

### **To increase transportation and healthcare access, OUSA recommends:**

**6)** The provincial government amend Ontario Regulation 189/09: Go Transit Service Area to expand transit routes throughout the province including rural and northern areas, ensuring that all students have access to inter-regional transportation services.

For rural and northern students, the flexibility and ease of getting around has become increasingly problematic as options for inter-regional transit have declined over the past several years. Under the *Metrolinx Act*, Ontario Regulation 189/09 stipulates certain regions that can be serviced by GO Transit, all of which exclude northern

<sup>7</sup> *Campus Sexual Violence: Guidelines for a Comprehensive Response* (Vancouver, BC: Ending Violence Association of BC, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Goldfarb, E. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(1), 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>

communities.<sup>9</sup> Between the 1990's to the mid-2010's, train services that connected northern Ontario cities to one another and to larger, southern metropolitan areas were discontinued.<sup>10</sup> The Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program found that all participants believed locally-based transportation options had a "high or moderately high" effect on improving mobility for community members, especially those without a car, with 42% of these funded pilots servicing post-secondary institutions.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, research suggests that investing in public transit ultimately reduces national costs associated with traffic collisions and respiratory illness, with annual savings of \$12.6 billion and \$137 million, respectively.<sup>12</sup> GO Transit is the primary rapid inter-regional transit system in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, and students in rural and northern regions would benefit greatly from an expansion to O. Reg. 189/09, thus rationalizing why the provincial government should amend this regulation to be more inclusive of these needs.

7) The provincial government provide targeted funding to the Ontario Health Agency for expanded access to virtual health in order to connect inbound rural and northern students with their hometown or preferred physicians, as well as specialists.

Disparities in northern Ontario healthcare have existed for many years due to issues with proximity, weather, availability of specialists, and physical and broadband infrastructure, and these gaps were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic inciting longer wait times and doctor shortages.<sup>13</sup> Notably, respondents to a survey conducted by the Ontario Medical Association gave a "C" level grade to northern Ontario's quality of healthcare.<sup>14</sup> This inequitable access to healthcare puts students in a precarious position should they require immediate medical attention. Consequently, the provincial government should provide targeted funding to the Ontario Health Agency to expand virtual health access for rural and northern students.

<sup>9</sup> *Metrolinx Act*, 2006, S.O. 2006, c. 16; O. Reg. 189/09: GO TRANSIT SERVICE AREA.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Marshall, "Planes, trains, and automobiles (sort of): Getting to and around northern Ontario without a car," *TVO Today*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.tvo.org/article/planes-trains-and-automobiles-sort-of-getting-to-and-around-northern-ontario-without-a-car>

<sup>11</sup> Ontario Ministry of Transportation, "Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program: Survey And Final Reporting Evaluation," Government of Ontario, March 2018,

[https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/CT%20Pilot%20Grant%20Program%20Evaluation%20Results%20MTO%20March%202018\(1\).pdf](https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/CT%20Pilot%20Grant%20Program%20Evaluation%20Results%20MTO%20March%202018(1).pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Urban Transit Association, "Urban Mobility Issue Paper: The Economic Impact of Transit Investment in Canada," Canadian Urban Transit Association, Issue Paper 50, 2018, [https://cutaactu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/final\\_issue\\_paper\\_50\\_cuta\\_v2.pdf](https://cutaactu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/final_issue_paper_50_cuta_v2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ontario Medical Association, "Prescription for northern Ontario," *Ontario Medical Association*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.oma.org/uploadedfiles/oma/media/public/oma-hcp-northernplatform.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.