The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 160,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at nine student associations across Ontario.

Student Accessibility and Disability Inclusion

OUSA believes all willing and academically qualified students should be able to access post-secondary education in Ontario. However, students with disabilities, both visible and invisible, face barriers to furthering their education and meaningfully engaging with their institutional communities due to the lack of accessibility and accommodations that exists on many campuses. This practice negatively impacts their post-secondary engagement and persistence. OUSA believes that the Ministry of Colleges and Universities can work alongside Ontario universities to create more accessible and equitable campuses to ensure the participation of all attending students.
THE PROBLEM

Isolating Campus Environments

Students are concerned with the understanding of disabilities on campus. Students attending post-secondary institutions have limited knowledge of disability in accessibility, mostly citing learning disabilities, mobility, and sensory impairments, with a relatively small percentage indicating mental health disabilities. The lack of awareness creates a stigma for students navigating post-secondary education. Students who come from cultural backgrounds in which disability is considered taboo are also navigating internalized fear or social stigma when they seek out support services or treatment.

The knowledge deficit surrounding disability extends to university staff and volunteers. Although AODA training is mandated by law, student workers and volunteers often must be directed to complete AODA training. Despite AODA mandates for any employed individual in Ontario, there is a lack of post-secondary tailored training for instructors, staff and teaching assistants. Additionally, a deficit in AODA-related knowledge among university administration and staff contributes to non-compliance and ableism in classrooms and administrative settings.

Students are worried about the physical barriers for students with disabilities on their campuses. There is a lack of accessible parking on university campuses. At some institutions, students may incur additional costs for accessible parking, creating an additional financial burden on students with disabilities. In addition, a lack of accessible parking can impede students with disabilities from fully participating in campus life due to longer travel times and inaccessible routes from the nearest accessible parking.

Aging and existing accessibility infrastructure within post-secondary institutions are poorly maintained, creating accessibility barriers. Institutions often offset accessibility ramps from main entrances, making navigating buildings and traversing campus efficiently difficult for students with mobility devices. Further accessibility barriers include a lack of automatic door openers and the lack of signage for accessible pathways. Additionally, visually impaired students are often underserved on university campuses due to the lack of visual aids.

Students are concerned about the inaccessibility of washrooms for students with disabilities. The location of barrier-free washrooms is often farther away from general spaces and difficult to access. For visually impaired students they may not and often do not have access to the appropriate signage in on-campus washrooms.

Barriers To Transition

Students are concerned about incoming student transition into post-secondary education. Students are often unaware that they must provide annual documentation for renewal of accommodations before the start of courses. Without adequate transition information, students who develop a disability during their post-secondary education may not be able to identify that they could benefit from or qualify for accommodations. Beyond accessing accommodations, there are also access barriers for welcome programming. Not all orientations are designed with accessibility in mind, excluding students with disabilities from important campus integration activities.

Summer transition programs are another facet of students’ introduction to post-secondary, wherein the access barriers, such as unmet accommodation requirements, hinder student participation. While they are meant to inform students of what to expect during in school year, generalized summer transition programs insufficiently address and inform on accessibility services and supports. The
on accessibility services and supports. The information provided to students in summer transition programming regarding accessibility services varies across institutions, with little to no effort to ensure students are accurately informed across the province.

Students are also concerned about the support for students with disabilities as they transition from post-secondary education into the workforce. Students with disabilities do not have sufficient opportunities to build their expertise and career-related experience before graduating from post-secondary. When students try to gain work experience during their undergraduate degrees, they face additional challenges when navigating ODSP and wages. Recipients of ODSP are at risk of a reduction or suspension of their funding if they earn more than $1000 per month. This tends to limit students’ ability to engage in meaningful work opportunities. Students with disabilities also face barriers when acquiring employment. Students with visible disabilities face barriers early on in the job process. Those with invisible disabilities face an additional barrier to obtaining employment, given the limited knowledge of how, when, or if to disclose a disability to a potential employer. In instances where students with disabilities do acquire work, they are often not provided with the appropriate accommodations by their employers. As a result, they regularly have to pay out of pocket to make their workplaces accessible to them. This financial burden extends to student staff at institutions that often lack the funding to provide the accommodations necessary for those with physical support needs.

**Ineffective Support Services**

Students are concerned about the quality of support services available to students with disabilities. There are many barriers that students with disabilities must navigate when trying to access accommodations. Accommodation of students with disabilities at the post-secondary level is not subject to the same detailed legislative structures as at the primary and secondary levels. As a result, there is a lack of standardization for accommodations across the province. Documentation requirement variation between post-secondary institutions makes the post-secondary application process for disability-related accommodations challenging to understand. This may limit students’ choice of post-secondary institution because they do not have the resources to obtain the required documentation for academic accommodations at their preferred school. When admitted, students may encounter barriers in receiving adequate accommodations for their disabilities due to the inadequate cohesion related to disability policy. The Ontario Human Rights Commission only broadly defines disability, which fails to encompass individuals with semi-permanent disabilities, which are expected to persist and cause disruptions to a student’s career at a post-secondary institution. Once students acquire accommodations, faculty and staff may not have the proper training or resources to implement academic accommodations. If students encounter barriers to having their accommodations met, not all institutions hold an independent review process for appeals for accommodations, creating obstacles in the dispute process. While some of these barriers could be remedied through improvements in teaching practices across the province, it is difficult to actualize
Students are concerned about administrative processes associated with academic accommodations. Students often experience barriers when seeking access to the academic accommodations they need to reach their full potential of achieving success within a post-secondary institution. Students do not receive interim accommodation support during the registration process for academic accommodations. Delays in implementing academic accommodations can severely impact a student’s ability to participate academically. Students with disabilities are more likely to face academic strain, which may be further exacerbated when navigating university processes. Streamlining university processes could mitigate these issues. However, students are often not provided with the necessary, timely, and/or adequate information regarding the different academic accommodations available.

Financial Barriers

Students are concerned about the financial inequity faced by many students with disabilities. Students with disabilities on ODSP face many challenges when accessing student financial aid. Students on ODSP do not typically receive enough OSAP to cover residence costs and other costs associated with post-secondary education. There are communication gaps for the eligibility of OSAP and ODSP for students who are eligible for both programs, which can result in students who may be ineligible to apply for OSAP along with ODSP. Students with disabilities also face barriers institutionally in accessing financial support. The costs of acquiring psychological, physiological, and advanced testing assessments are costly and can be a barrier to receiving academic accommodations. As well, some disabilities are inconsistently defined across Ontario institutions, preventing some
students from being able to access intended financial support. Further, a student’s physical and mental accessibility needs may lead to financial burdens when pursuing post-secondary education.

Transit Inaccessibility

Students are worried about the accessibility of transit in and around their campuses. Students with disabilities at post-secondary institutions face physical and financial barriers that create obstacles to accessing academic, social, or cultural environments on campuses. These concerns are exacerbated as the seasons change as post-secondary institution infrastructure is limited in accessibility design and seasonal insight posing significant transportation barriers for students.

THE SOLUTION

To address these concerns, students representing OUSA’s membership have come together to propose the following recommendations that the provincial government should adopt to support accessible post-secondary education for all students in Ontario.

Improving Campus Environments

To ensure students are not faced with social exclusion and stigma on campus from university staff, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) should collaborate with the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility and students with disabilities to create standardized accessibility training based on the Post-secondary Education Standards Development Committee 2022 Final Recommendations Report. Within this training, the MCU should ensure that the post-secondary it is intersectional and aims to address the additional barriers racialized and other marginalized people with disabilities may face. Additionally, the MCU should mandate that institutions administer comprehensive and intuitive post-secondary-specific AODA training to all staff, student staff, and volunteers. To facilitate institutional cohesion, the provincial government should mandate that all institutions have an advisory committee dedicated to campus accessibility and require that it includes students with disabilities, university personnel, and university stakeholders. To ensure accessibility is considered at the classroom level, MCU 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 guidelines for incorporation of universal design for teaching and learning into their classrooms.

To improve parking accessibility, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate all post-secondary institutions to provide universal parking passes for students with disabilities. The provincial government should also allocate capital funds to universities specifically looking to modify existing or create new accessible parking spots on campus. Further, the provincial government should amend section 80.33 of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act to require post-secondary institutions with multiple off-street parking facilities to distribute accessible parking spaces on campus evenly, considering the utilization of the buildings the parking lots are near.

Students ask that the Ministry of Colleges and Universities provide envelope funding to institutions to retrofit existing and encourage redesigning older infrastructure to comply with and go beyond Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) standards. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that all physical signs, including automatic door openers, include braille. The provincial government should also provide envelope funding to universities’ deferred maintenance budgets for the implementation of repairs and enhancements to campus pathways,
classrooms, and buildings that specifically work to increase the overall accessibility of campus for students with disabilities.

To improve washroom accessibility, students recommend that the Ministry of Colleges and Universities provide envelope funding to universities to equip washrooms with accessibility aids to increase the availability of aids such as ceiling lifts and braille signage. In addition, the provincial government should provide institutions with envelope funding to increase the number of barrier-free washrooms on university campuses.

**Supporting Transitions**

To support students’ transition into post-secondary, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should develop guiding principles for institutions to enact concerning the documentation process of receiving support. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should also create a best practises guideline for institutions on creating fully accessible orientation weeks.

To make summer transition programs more accessible, the provincial government should require general summer transition programs supported by government funding to integrate information on accessibility services and accommodation for all students. The funding should be provided to institutional accessibility services, equivalents, and other institutional organizations involved in transition programming. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should also mandate that all universities make specific summer transition services available for incoming students with disabilities.

The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario with researching best practices for transition programs and support services for students with disabilities based on findings from the Transitions Longitudinal Study and additional research to ensure consistency across institutions.

Students ask the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to make transitions into employment for students with disabilities by providing institutions funding to ensure all on-campus student employment opportunities are accessible to students with disabilities. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should partner with post-secondary institutions and businesses to increase work-integrated learning opportunities that are equally available to students with disabilities to meet the current student demand. In addition, Employment Ontario should expand upon existing incentives to hire youth by adding combined disability youth incentives and support similar to those offered by the Ontario Disability Support Program: Employment Supports. Further, the provincial government should provide funding to institutions to train an existing career consultant or a career consultant specifically dedicated to supporting students with disabilities transition into the workforce.

**Strengthening Support Services**

To make support services more accessible, the provincial government should provide funding to the IDIA to conduct research on standards of practice for post-secondary institutions to provide supports for students with disabilities. The provincial government should work with the IDIA to develop standard documentation for admissions applications and verify students’ disabilities. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) should also task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario with creating a standard to evaluate the effectiveness of accessibility services at post-secondary institutions. The MCU should mandate that institutions have an independent body, such as an ombuds office or similar role, to review complaints about accessibility services.
The Ontario Human Rights Commission should develop a formal definition of disability that describes individuals with functional limitations that are expected to persist, but not necessarily for their whole life. The province should also mandate that all campuses have a virtual accessibility hub that provides students with support systems and resources to ensure they excel during their university careers. In addition, the province should give institutions funding for universities to have their own attendant program. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should create a best practices guideline on confidentiality and staff compliance with the Code of Disability Policy.

To improve mental health accessibility, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction and The Ministry of College Universities should collaborate to develop best practices for a whole-of-community approach that supports comprehensive and accessible mental health services for students with disabilities. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should also provide post-secondary institutions with annual funding for counselling services and resources to address the growing need for more mental health support. Further, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and The Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions should collaborate to develop a strategy to increase support for students with emerging mental health disabilities, particularly in communities with a large young adult population (such as communities near post-secondary institutions).

Students ask that the provincial government provide additional envelope funding through the Accessibility Fund for Students with Disabilities for post-secondary institutions to secure assistive technologies for students. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should also modify the accessibility funding model to reflect the total student population rather than only students with disabilities. In addition, the provincial government should provide additional envelope funding through the Accessibility Fund for Students with Disabilities for other accessibility support services.

**Improving Academic Accommodations**

To ensure academic accommodations are consistently equitable, students ask the provincial government to mandate that universities adopt a consistent and systematic review process of their academic accommodations policy every five years to ensure that the policy remains relevant and current.

As documentation is an essential step in acquiring accommodations, students recommend the government task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario with conducting a review of province-wide documentation standards across institutions in mental health. The provincial government should extensively review existing academic accommodation standards at Ontario universities to assess the adequacy of the range of accommodations provided. In addition, the provincial government should mandate that province-wide documentation standards do not require students with registered permanent disabilities to seek additional forms of documentation.

OUSA also recommends the provincial government expand the Ontario Health Insurance Program and University Health Insurance Plan coverage to include the cost of documentation for international and out-of-province students. The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario with reviewing the assessment requirements for students seeking academic accommodations to ensure that these requirements do not cause undue hardship to students.

To improve the academic accommodation processes, OUSA recommends the provincial government mandate for post-secondary
institutions to sufficiently communicate with and inform students about the range of accessibility services available. The provincial government should also create a set of guiding standardized principles for an interim accommodation process so all students with disabilities can access the same level of interim accommodations and support. Additionally, the provincial government should direct the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to investigate best practices in academic accommodation processes to be adopted by university accessibility services. The provincial government should utilize best practices provided by HEQCO to mandate the training of instructors and staff on how to best facilitate academic accommodations. Further, the provincial government should require universities to disclose support systems on their website in easily accessible formats.

Addressing Financial Barriers

To make the financial aid process more equitable, students recommend that the provincial government allow all ODSP recipients to qualify for OSAP. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should amend OSAP criteria to ensure that students with temporary disabilities can access federal funding. The provincial government should also lobby the federal government 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. Further, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should amend the OSAP academic probation and restriction penalties to consider the functional limitations and lived experience of students with permanent or temporary disabilities.

Improving Transit Accessibility

To improve transit accessibility, OUSA recommends The Ministry of Transportation ensure that all municipal transit systems include modernized transportation policy and innovative new technology in compliance with the AODA. The province should encourage post-secondary institutions to alleviate financial burdens on students with disabilities through specialized services and supports. Additionally, in collaboration with the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should improve existing transit information communications systems, including increased supports through virtual or in-person alternatives. The MTO should increase operational funding for municipal transit agencies to maintain and increase transit and para-transit service frequency to universities.