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 eight student associations across Ontario.

TUITION

Since the 2019 tuition framework renewal, students have seen a 10% decrease in tuition, but this has not resulted in greater access for all students. Over $400 million in cuts from OSAP has left fewer students with access to public support. Institutions have also experienced this strain as public funding has dwindled to just over 30%, and student tuition and fees now account for over 60% of institutional revenue across the province. Without sustainable government funding, institutions must rely on students to fill these gaps, jeopardizing the affordability, accessibility, quality and accountability of university education in Ontario. As a new school year begins, students hope that the provincial government will address their concerns and take steps toward restoring Ontario’s publicly funded post-secondary system.
THE PROBLEM

Increasing Financial Burden

Students are concerned about Ontario’s tuition framework and the lack of accountability to students. Ontario has the highest reliance on student tuition for revenue in the country. With public funding comprising less than half of total university revenues, post-secondary institutions in Ontario are now publicly assisted instead of publicly funded. This structure has placed undue financial strain on students across the province. While in-province tuition has been frozen since 2019, international tuition continues to increase at unregulated rates, creating a more significant burden on this student population.

Students in professional programs have greater tuition costs than other students. For prospective students, the high cost of professional program tuition often discourages and prevents them from pursuing these career paths. These financial stressors are exacerbated for international students as their tuition is, on average, seven times higher than domestic students. Additionally, students completing professional degrees often have mandatory cooperative and experiential learning requirements with associated costs not reflected in tuition. Significant financial burden paired with uncompensated work is a large barrier for many Ontarians who wish to pursue professional degrees.

Lack of Accountability

Students are worried about the high cost of tuition and its variation across different programs. Students should not pay unnecessarily high delivery fees unrelated to their programs. Additionally, institutions do not distribute operating costs and the burden of student services equitably across programs of study.

Lack of Transparency

Students are concerned with the institutional portrayal/dissemination of tuition information to students. Students are largely uninformed about where or how institutions use their fees or if they are using them appropriately. When attempting to access budgetary information, it is not uncommon for students to face inaccessible documents that make it difficult to understand. Students are often faced with barriers when advocating for change. They are frequently excluded from committees which discuss budget preparations for their institutions. However, when included, student representatives are often limited in their abilities to influence decision-making bodies. Due to inadequate training and background information on navigating and effectively engaging in complex issues, student voices are often left unheard in these critical conversations.

Unfair Payment Process

Students are worried about the financial penalties associated with deferring tuition payments. Students who do not receive financial aid would face increased post-secondary education costs for deferring their tuition payments. Deferral and late fees are unregulated, and interest can accrue rapidly. In some cases, students cannot pay their tuition on time due to extenuating circumstances and thus have to deal with additional financial burdens. Additionally, information regarding the deferment process may not be clear or readily available, leaving students unaware of the consequences of deferrals and late payments.

Unfair International Student Tuition

Students are concerned about the affordability of post-secondary education for international students. Tuition for international students remains uncapped, which creates inequity within education and poses a financial barrier for students wishing to study in Ontario. Typical planning measures are often ineffective for international students as their tuition is unregulated and continues to increase at
varying rates. International students pay much more than their domestic counterparts and face a lack of targeted financial aid programs. This means that international students are left with little to no recourse if they lose access to the financial resources they had when they started their education. These financial barriers make Ontario institutions inaccessible to many prospective international students. Conjointly, students are concerned that out-of-province students may also be affected by institutional attempts at student-driven revenue generation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regulate Tuition and Restore Public Funding

The provincial government should continue to freeze domestic tuition for the next five years while increasing operating grants within the new tuition framework. The provincial government should also aim to increase operating grants until operating grants contribute more than half of the universities’ operating budget to make them publicly funded institutions.

The provincial government should enforce a tuition freeze on all domestic professional program tuition for the next five years. The provincial government should also mandate that institutions provide a breakdown of estimated costs students may incur throughout their degree, including tuition, ancillary fees, and mandatory cooperative and experiential learning experiences. In addition, OUAC should ensure federal, provincial and institutional financial aid information is clearly incorporated into the advertised cost of professional student education. Further, the provincial government should task HEQCO to conduct research and create recommendations on the tuition levels for domestic and international professional programs across different institutions in Ontario.

Increase Accountability

In collaboration with the COU, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should establish requirements and guidelines for university budgeting processes that facilitate the accurate reflection of the cost of program delivery and the distribution of operating costs equally among students. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should also mandate that each university use a fair cost-sharing method that ensures that all students contribute to operating costs equally
regardless of their program of study.

The Council of Ontario Universities should leverage the existing OUInfo system to provide a central information chart that students can use to compare the costs of university programs based on tuition and incidental fees. The Council of Ontario Universities should also mandate that within the OUInfo system, a breakdown of expected expenses, which includes tuition, ancillary fees, and other mandatory fees students will incur throughout their program, be made available to prospective students.

**Improve Transparency**

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that undergraduate student representatives be provided with adequate training and support to enhance their abilities to provide useful feedback and insights to decision-making bodies. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should also mandate that students have voting representation on university-level budget committees, and these representative(s) should be student-appointed through a student union or other democratic processes. Additionally, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that university budgets be made publicly available in an accessible manner on their institutional website. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should craft a set of best practices in university budget reporting to promote increased transparency and accountability. Further, the ministry should task HEQCO with compiling the average difference in tuition rates among domestic, out-of-province, and international students within individual institutions. To complement this information, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that HEQCO produce a yearly report outlining each university’s tuition revenue breakdown in an accessible and easy-to-understand format to increase transparency.

**Maintaining a Fair Payment Process**

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should extend the current regulations surrounding deferral fees into the next iteration of the tuition framework. To improve accountability, the Ontario Government should develop a framework regarding Deferment fees in the Tuition Framework.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should create a series of best practices regarding financial penalties and how students can be encouraged to make payments that all institutions must follow. They should also mandate that students be informed immediately when they have incurred a late fee or if there is a pending late fee.

The province should mandate through the Tuition framework that universities establish an international tuition set-aside at the same rate as the domestic set-aside, with funds directed to need-based financial aid for international students. To strengthen accountability, the provincial government should create an International Student Tuition Fee Framework that regulates and caps incoming and in-cohort international student tuition fee increases. For out-of-province students, the provincial government should mandate that out-of-province student tuition match that of in-province students.