



POLICY PAPER

A Comprehensive Access Strategy

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ABOUT OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of 160,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, equitable, 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.

The member institutions and home office of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance operate on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Leni-Lunaape, Anishnawbek, and Mississauga peoples.

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OUSA policy papers are written by students to articulate student concerns and offer student-driven solutions for accessible, affordable, accountable, equitable, and high quality post-secondary education in the province.

To support our policies and ensure that we are effectively representing undergraduate and professional students at Ontario's universities, students and student groups from each of our nine member institutions were consulted to provide guidance and feedback on the principles, concerns, and recommendations contained herein.

OUSA would like to thank students and student groups from Brock University, Laurentian University, McMaster University, Ontario Tech University, Queen's University, Trent University Durham GTA, the University of Waterloo, Western University, and Wilfrid Laurier University for their valuable contributions to this policy paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GLOSSARY.....	17
CREATING A COMPREHENSIVE PROVINCIAL ACCESS STRATEGY	20
ACCESS FOR STUDENTS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS	22
OVERVIEW.....	21
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	25
RACIALIZED STUDENTS.....	29
INDIGENOUS STUDENTS	32
STUDENTS WITH LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	35
RURAL & NORTHERN STUDENTS.....	37
USE OF STRATEGIC MANDATE AGREEMENTS.....	40
ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO UNIVERSITY	46
FOUNDATIONAL PRE-DEGREE PROGRAMS.....	44
MATURE STUDENTS	47
TRANSFER STUDENTS BETWEEN POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS	49
OUTREACH & AWARENESS	53
GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES.....	52
INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES.....	53
FINANCIAL LITERACY & SUPPORT	55
K-12 EDUCATION	58
STREAMING	56
CAREER STUDIES COURSE CURRICULUM	59
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION, GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS, AND SUPPORT STAFF.....	61
RETENTION & ACADEMIC SUCCESS.....	64
EXTRACURRICULARS	67
SYSTEM DATA & INFORMATION.....	70
COLLECTING DATA	68
CENTRALIZATION & PUBLICATION OF DATA	71
POLICY STATEMENT.....	76

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROBLEM

Absence of a Comprehensive Provincial Access Strategy

Underrepresented groups face unique and compounding barriers in accessing and completing post-secondary education, limiting opportunities for qualified individuals and contributing to disproportionately high non-completion rates.

Lack of Access for Students from Underrepresented Groups

Students are concerned that those with intersecting identities face compounded systemic challenges and biases which hinder access to post-secondary education. Students from underrepresented groups may have disproportionately low access to information or equitable outreach opportunities when understanding post-secondary pathways. Additionally, enrollment growth has failed to reduce participation gaps for underrepresented groups, instead prioritizing general enrollment and maximizing revenue per student over equitable targeted improvements for those most in need. Students are concerned that needs-based means tested financial aid programs do not equitably value lived experiences, financial realities and systemic barriers of students. The prevalence of discrimination, microaggressions, and unsafe spaces on campuses and in communities creates an environment where marginalized students do not feel valued or supported, impacting their decision to access post-secondary education. Students worry that barriers in the application process, such as financial barriers, lack of guidance and promotion, when applying to multiple and/or high-cost programs, impede access for underrepresented students to post-secondary education. Further, first-generation students face informational barriers and may lack the financial support required to prepare and assist them for post-secondary education.

Students are concerned that post-secondary institutions may inaccurately or inadequately communicate their available accommodations and changes to them, for students with disabilities. They worry that a lack of accessible infrastructure and reasonable accommodations during elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education may limit students' ability to pursue their post-secondary pathway of choice.

Students with invisible disabilities face unique challenges that may impact their academic success and access to accommodations. Additionally, students with undiagnosed disabilities may be unable to get a diagnosis due to their financial, logistical, cultural, administrative, and bureaucratic barriers, leading to their accessibility requests being denied. Students worry that a lack of disability inclusion in physical, social, and decision-making environments limits the ability of students with disabilities to attend, participate, and succeed in post-secondary institutions. Further, aging infrastructure, as worsened by Ontario's deferred maintenance backlog, coupled with insufficient accessibility services, disproportionately limits access options for students with disabilities. Lastly, students are concerned that primary and secondary education for students with disabilities does not adequately prioritize the development of essential skills needed for their long-term success.

Students worry that systemic racism and discrimination have significantly impacted racialized students' access to post-secondary education. Cuts to certain academic programs and research funding (i.e. social science and humanities) disproportionately impact racialized students by limiting their access to programs that align with their career aspirations and educational ambitions. Further, students are concerned that reinforced stereotypes associated with students' race or culture, combined with a lack of representation amongst those in post-secondary education, may lead students to not pursue their preferred post-secondary pathway.

Students are concerned that institutional and systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples affects educational outcomes and career preparedness, limiting opportunities, readiness, social wellbeing, and

confidence for post-secondary education. Many non-Indigenous educational staff, administrators, and counsellors lack the necessary cultural understanding to effectively support Indigenous students, resulting in potential biases and barriers to academic and personal success. Further, limited Indigenous language services, coupled with inadequate mental health supports and cultural practices for Indigenous students, create systemic barriers that limit full engagement and perpetuate inequities in post-secondary education. Students worry that preconceived notions about Indigenous Peoples in the educational institutions of their choice may pressure Indigenous students into post-secondary pathways that do not align with their preferences or goals. Additionally, a lack of Indigenous representation in education, coupled with colonial academic curricula, discourages Indigenous students from pursuing post-secondary education. Universities lack programs to bridge the educational gaps that may be experienced by Indigenous students on First Nation reserves due to a lack of resources or support. Many Indigenous-specific post-secondary education programs (e.g., Indigenous Studies, Indigenous Education) remain inaccessible for Indigenous students due to culturally unsafe environments, often instigated by non-Indigenous faculty & peers. Lastly, Indigenous faculty face lower promotion and tenure rates, resulting in reduced retention and higher turnover, which directly impacts students' access to consistent mentorship and culturally relevant education.

Students are concerned that those of lower socioeconomic status may face significant financial barriers when accessing post-secondary education. Additionally, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have intersecting identities, wherein they face compounding systemic barriers in accessing and affording post-secondary education. Students with reduced financial means may not be able to devote time to studying and pursuing extracurricular activities due to work or familial obligations. Moreover, students from families of lower socioeconomic status may receive disproportionately low support or assistance from their families in accessing and affording post-secondary education. Students worry that primary and secondary schools in neighbourhoods with a greater density of lower socioeconomic families may lack the resources needed to support their students and allow them to succeed in a learning environment. Further, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be deterred from accessing post-secondary education due to limited access to grants, rather than loans and a lack of capacity to repay student debt, and eligibility for grants to loans.

Students are also concerned that students living in rural and northern communities are disproportionately affected by unreliable internet access. It is known that rural and northern areas in Ontario experience lower enrollment rates into post-secondary education compared to southern, urban counterparts. Students worry that geographical challenges and insufficient recruitment and outreach efforts hinder rural and northern students from accessing post-secondary education and related opportunities. The model used for calculating Ontario Student Grants does not factor in distance-related travel costs for students in rural or northern areas. Further, lack of adequate support services and resources diminishes a rural and northern student's chances of completing pre-bachelor's education, limiting eligible post-secondary pathways and future career opportunities. Students are concerned by high relocation costs, familial ties, and policies that favour urban institutions, restrict program availability and educational pathways for rural and northern students. Additionally, many post-secondary institutions in Ontario do not provide adequate support in French and Indigenous languages, which, when coupled with inadequate mental health supports, perpetuate systemic inequities to full engagement and access to post-secondary education. Students are worried for those who may feel discouraged in accessing post-secondary education in rural and northern communities due to perceived lack of diversity.

Students are concerned that current Strategic Mandate Agreements fail to prioritize access or support for marginalized and underrepresented student groups in institutional enrolment strategies and differentiation strategies. Further, current Strategic Mandate Agreements incentivize institutions to focus on metrics that may disadvantage underrepresented groups, which exacerbates and intensifies existing barriers.

Insufficient Pathways to University

Students worry that those with potential may lack awareness regarding the existence of pre-degree/foundational programs to help them qualify for post-secondary pathways. Students are also concerned that secondary school level educators may lack awareness and adequate information regarding the existence of pre-degree programs to guide students unable to qualify for post-secondary education. There is a lack of information and research into the effectiveness, success, and quality of these programs due to minimal government oversight/regulations enforcing standards and expectations to be met by these programs, allowing for a lack of institutional accountability. Lack of adequate information makes existing pre-degree programs inaccessible.

There is a lack of reviews and updates on the effectiveness of support offered to mature students. Students are concerned that mature students often have obligations outside of post-secondary education, such as caring for dependents and job commitments, that can limit, lengthen, or make post-secondary education inaccessible due to a lack of support for caregivers. Further, mature students in part-time studies who continue working and/or caring for dependents often do not qualify for particular grants and/or loans due to their income thresholds. Students are concerned for mature students who may not have the financial support or qualify for existing supports to return/continue, or change their educational background. Further, OSAP's definition of mature students, currently termed as 'Independent students', was changed from out of school for four years to six, making many students unable to access certain, and often necessary, financial aid support. Students worry that mature students often face challenges such as limited flexibility, unsuitable courses, a lack of relevant co-curricular activities, and insufficient support from knowledgeable advisors, which contribute to lower retention rates. Also, current materials utilized by institutions to support mature students are inadequate in addressing the current pressing needs and challenges of mature students.

Students worry that transfer students may lack the financial resources needed to cover costs associated with transferring between post-secondary institutions. Additionally, transfer students are required to pay the baseline application cost for three programs when applying for transfer programs through the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC), even when applying for only one program. Students are worried that transfer students may be unaware of the process or ability to transfer between post-secondary institutions, and available resources to support them, as the rules for transferring between different institutions are inconsistent and unstandardized. Further, students considering transferring between post-secondary institutions struggle to access relevant information due to a lack of informed and targeted outreach and a lack of data collection on student transfers. Students are also concerned about how students from marginalized groups often face additional barriers in transferring between post-secondary institutions, and often do not see some types of post-secondary institutions as a viable option for them. Also, students often face unexpected challenges due to the current consequences of being a transfer student, such as increased degree completion times and lower retention or graduation rates. Students are concerned by the inability to access transfer pathways, which can aid students in mitigating the issues and subsequent consequences that they may face at their current institution.

Ineffective Outreach and Awareness

Students are concerned about how students who do not have their high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) often have limited awareness of opportunities for post-secondary education. There is little research focused on the outcomes and effectiveness of outreach programs. Additionally, students who may benefit from outreach programs may be unaware of their existence or requirements. Outreach programs may not be designed to address the specific needs of students without traditional secondary school credentials, such as academic preparation, flexible entry pathways, financial and cultural support, career guidance, and mental well-being resources.

Students are worried about those who have not completed secondary school or who lack post-secondary prerequisites may face significant challenges in accessing post-secondary education. Due to a lack of targeted funding and evaluation, outreach efforts for underrepresented groups remain inconsistent and ineffective in improving access to post-secondary education. Students are concerned that current outreach efforts do not adequately support informed decision-making for secondary students who wish to access post-secondary education.

Students are concerned that delayed investment in RESPs, and post-secondary financial planning can have long-term consequences on prospective students' ability to access and afford higher education. Insufficient awareness of financial aid, support services, and resources, along with untimely dissemination of this information, can hinder students' ability to realize that post-secondary education is a viable option. Students are also worried about first-generation students who may face disproportionate barriers in developing financial literacy and receiving consistent support from their families when financing post-secondary education. Additionally, prospective students may not have the financial literacy required to access post-secondary education. The lack of transparency around post-secondary loan repayment may prevent students from accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education altogether.

Limited Support in K-12 Education

Students are concerned by the stigmatization associated with 'applied' streams, which has pressured students to enroll in classes that are not the right fit for them, hindering their academic and career success. The difficulties presented when switching between various streams act as a barrier for students to qualify for their post-secondary pathway of choice. They are also worried that students are required to make choices about their stream before they understand the courses required for their post-secondary pathways. Many students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), an/or from marginalized groups, are often influenced into the Applied stream, even in cases where they may succeed more in the Academic stream. While the province has de-streamed mandatory compulsory courses for grade nine, some schools receive inadequate support to implement the changes.

Students are worried that many students lack exposure to support systems that can provide guidance on post-secondary pathways and benefits, while the secondary school curriculum has traditionally been ineffective in providing this knowledge. Additionally, many students lack the knowledge needed to make an informed decision about entering university and college streams. Finally, many students lack exposure to how various post-secondary pathways can affect future employment opportunities.

Students can have negative or unhelpful experiences in their school's guidance department since counselors often lack adequate training, time, and resources, preventing the exploration of post-secondary pathways. Students are concerned by the insufficient number of support staff in schools, which causes support staff to take on additional responsibilities, diverting their focus from curriculum delivery and resulting in students falling behind academically. Students are concerned that BIPOC students often face inequitable treatment from staff, leading to lower academic performance, disproportionate suspension rates, and decreased interest in post-secondary programs. Additionally, BIPOC students are underrepresented among educational staff and may not be adequately supported by support staff who lack similar lived experiences. Due to a lack of adequate mental health and wellness support staff, guidance counselors and teachers are allocating more of their resources to managing student mental health concerns, diverting their focus from curriculum and academic resource delivery.

Students from underrepresented groups may have exposure to inadequate levels of inter-generational knowledge that would promote interest in post-secondary education. Students are worried that many of the groups that are underrepresented in post-secondary education also experience disproportionately high secondary school dropout rates. Moreover, some secondary school students lack adequate access

to the resources that enable academic success and maintain motivation to continue with their education. Students are worried that individuals with limited access to digital learning tools fall disproportionately behind in online learning environments, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can further exacerbate dropout rates. Students are also concerned that suspensions do not adequately rehabilitate students and equip them with the skills and confidence to achieve academic success upon return. Further, Black and Indigenous students are disproportionately affected by suspensions and expulsions.

Students are concerned that parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds may struggle in providing additional educational opportunities they can provide for their children due to limited resources and capacity, as well as a lack of accessible information, which can limit interest in and eligibility for post-secondary education. Additionally, extracurriculars often have cultural, social, and financial barriers that limit students' ability to participate in them, and are inaccessible to those who have to work paid jobs or are caregivers throughout secondary school. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not be able to access merit-based grants due to being unable to participate in extracurriculars.

Inadequate System Data and Information

Students are concerned that data collection in Ontario is inadequate, with third-party organizations helping to fill data availability gaps. Students may not be adequately informed about the protection, collection, and use of their data in post-secondary institutions. Further, initiatives intended to increase access for underrepresented groups cannot always be consistently and thoroughly evaluated, due to lack of information. Lack of longitudinal data in certain areas makes measuring post-secondary access in Ontario difficult. Students are also worried that the collection of student longitudinal data may not be transparently communicated to students transitioning from elementary to secondary to post-secondary education.

Students are concerned that current student access data is fragmented and not presented in a single location, remaining inaccessible for sector stakeholders and failing to effectively action government policy in a way that equitably supports students' experience. Further, marginalized students are disproportionately impacted by the lack of regulation and privacy around third-party platforms when collecting extensive student data. Students are concerned by insufficient proactive consultation on diverse student concerns across Ontario's primary and secondary education system, which fails to adequately inform government policy that supports students' experience in the post-secondary sector.

THE SOLUTION

Creating a Comprehensive Provincial Access Strategy

Students recommend that the provincial government implement an access strategy in conjunction with equity-focused, targeted retention and completion strategies that address the unique needs of students, alongside relevant accountability mechanisms, to ensure students are able to attain the full benefits of post-secondary education.

Improved Access for Students from Underrepresented Groups

To improve access for students from underrepresented groups, students recommend that the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES) should require post-secondary institutions to develop and report on enrollment and outreach strategies for underrepresented groups to inform equity-based funding for Strategic Mandate Agreements. Additionally, MCURES should expand the current OSAP bursary programs for underrepresented students that aim to cover the cost of preparatory prerequisites. Students also recommend that MCURES should re-evaluate needs-based means testing and repayment plans for provincial financial aid programs to equitably value financial

challenges and systemic barriers faced by underrepresented students. Further, the provincial government should meaningfully consult with underrepresented students to refine existing policies and increase resources to fund and supports programs that enable students to select their preferred post-secondary pathway. Students recommend that the provincial government promote databases and programs through the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) portal for families and students when aspiring to access post-secondary education. Lastly, the provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions offer targeted scholarships towards underrepresented students through earmarked envelope funding.

OUSA recommends that the provincial government modify the existing OSAP funding structure to reimburse students seeking a diagnosis, regardless of diagnostic results. Additionally, the provincial government should provide appreciable funding to the Facilities Renewal Program for the implementation of repairs and modifications of physical infrastructure to meet the accessibility needs of students. Students also recommend that the provincial government provide additional grant funding to implement accessible physical infrastructure modifying existing physical infrastructure to meet students' accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions. The provincial government should provide additional grant funding to support initiatives that aim to modify academic processes to meet student accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions. Moreover, the provincial government should develop a system for evaluating and verifying accessibility supports at individual post-secondary institutions and present this information in a central location. OUSA recommends that the provincial government task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to review the effectiveness of programming and support for students with disabilities to ensure academic skill development is a focus. Additionally, the provincial government should incentivize the implementation of transition programs between primary, secondary, and post-secondary education to support students with disabilities. The provincial government should mandate post-secondary institutions to publish standardized, easily accessible guides outlining all available accommodations. Lastly, the provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to publish best practices guidelines on student accommodations to help students know when institutions are providing accommodations and to better support students' self-advocacy.

Students recommend that the provincial government assemble an advisory committee of diverse racialized students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community leaders to consult on the representation of racialized students and educational outcomes at the post-secondary level. Additionally, the provincial government should create a special purpose grant that would support institutions to sustain courses and programs that enable academic pursuit and dialogue around justice, reconciliation and humanity. Finally, the provincial government should amend section 20 (8) of the MTCU Act to mandate institutional collection and publication of disaggregated race-based data every three years.

OUSA recommends that the provincial government implement mandatory, recurring, and culturally relevant anti-Indigenous racism and cultural sensitivity training for non-Indigenous educators, administrators, and counsellors. Additionally, the provincial government should increase and provide long-term funding to support increased Indigenous representation in leadership and staff roles at post-secondary institutions. Students recommend that the provincial government mandate post-secondary institutions to ensure a continued high-education by replacing vacant and retiring Indigenous education positions with equally qualified successors. They also recommend that MCURES collaborate with the federal government to implement the TRC Calls to Action by using the proposed government strategies, specifically focusing on Calls 14 and 15, to increase the accessibility of post-secondary education resources in Indigenous languages. The provincial government should invest in Indigenous centered post-secondary education outreach programs during secondary education, both on- and off-reserve, to increase students' ability to attend their preferred post-secondary education pathway. Additionally, the provincial government should fund post-secondary bridging programs that are developed by Indigenous

communities and educators that incorporate cultural and academic transition supports. Students recommend that the provincial government and post-secondary institutions collaborate with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to provide a culturally inclusive environment for hiring, retaining and ensuring the succession of Indigenous staff, enhancing classroom representation and developing decolonial pedagogies for Indigenous course content and programs. Further, the provincial government should develop comprehensive and accessible outreach resources outlining the financial supports available to Indigenous post-secondary students in Indigenous languages. Lastly, the provincial government should fund and mandate enhanced training for guidance counsellors on pathways to post-secondary education for Indigenous students through the Ministry of Education.

OUSA recommends that the provincial government invest in targeted enrichment programs which aim to build lifelong learning skills for students with lower socioeconomic status, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education. They also recommend that the provincial government should increase funding for outreach groups to provide resources, programs and services for elementary and secondary schools in neighbourhoods with an increased lower socioeconomic population, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education.

Students recommend that the Ministry of Education should collaborate with rural and northern school boards to create localized awareness campaigns aiming to address gaps in existing post-secondary recruitment and outreach efforts. The provincial government should also re-establish the Geographic Circumstances Grant to expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund to provide targeted financial support and travel subsidies for students to access the Ontario Universities' fair in the nearest region. Further, the provincial government should actively collaborate with rural and northern community organizations and local Indigenous governments, ensuring adequate consultation on local needs as well as addressing unique barriers for rural and northern students in accessing post-secondary education. Students recommend that the provincial government work with the federal government to ensure that students are appropriately prioritized in the federal government's investment in internet access. Students also recommend that the provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel, from their place of permanent residence to their preferred institution offering their program of choice. Further, the provincial government should provide envelope funding to support the provision of support services and courses in French and Indigenous languages. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should provide grant funding to expand student services in French for students accessing rural and northern bilingual post-secondary institutions. Additionally, the provincial government should provide grant funding to rural and northern community organizations for programming targeting the inclusion of underrepresented groups.

Students recommend that MCURES should expand upon the Enrolment Strategy section of the next iteration of Strategic Mandate Agreements with a focus on increasing and incentivizing equitable access. Additionally, MCURES should add a metric to performance-based funding based on the volume and breadth of student support programs specifically aimed at supporting students from underrepresented groups. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should strategically distribute funds to institutions which set and meet ambitious and meaningful student access targets through their Strategic Mandate Agreements. Students recommend that the provincial government revise the weighting of the metrics in Strategic Mandate Agreements to ensure they do not disadvantage students from marginalized groups, including placing less emphasis on graduate earnings and employment.

Promote Alternative Pathways to University

Students recommend that MCURES should work in collaboration with the Ontario College Application Service to conduct up to date research and data collection on the success of pre-degree programs and the outcomes of students completing such programs. Additionally, MCURES, in collaboration with institutions currently offering foundational programs, should mandate minimum standards and expectations that pre-degree programs should achieve. Students also recommend that MCURES should increase public awareness on the availability of pre-degree programs as an alternate pathway to post-secondary education, in a centralized and accessible manner, helping future students and secondary school educators to remain informed of all their educational options.

OUSA recommends that MCURES increase current OSAP funding by creating grants for students with dependents to subsidize the cost of care, to supplement the Federal Bursary for Students with Dependents. Further, students recommend that MCURES amend OSAP to reduce the percentage of courses needed to be considered full-time for mature students to 40 percent of a full course load. Additionally, the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services should incentivize businesses, through a tax break, to assist mature student employees in continuing their education. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should redefine independent students within OSAP to match both federal student aid guidelines and language commonly used by postsecondary institutions. Lastly, MCURES should conduct recent research and create materials and training for post-secondary institutions to better support the needs of Mature Students.

Students recommend that MCURES should develop a grant, through the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), for lower socioeconomic transfer students to waive their cost of transfer fees. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should mandate that OUAC allow transfer students to pay a per-program-basis application fee, removing the current baseline cost for students, so students seeking to transfer, are not expected to pay for costs beyond the application fee(s) for the program(s) they aspire to transfer to. Additionally, the provincial government should track student transfer programs and release anonymized information to institutions to help better inform university outreach and programming. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should promote the standardization of more basic and general course offerings to facilitate the accreditation of previously passed courses for incoming transfer students as a step towards standardizing transfer credit processes to achieve a provincial post-secondary transfer credit guide. Students also recommend that MCURES should develop a fund and distinct institutional responsibilities that allow for the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) and post-secondary institutions to allocate resources to increase advertising of transfer opportunities. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should, in consultation with experts such as ONCAT and advocacy groups, work/collaborate to identify gaps in the transfer credit system and supports needed by transfer students. Moreover, MCURES should develop outreach programs aimed at building knowledge around university transfer protocols, expectations, and supports, and invest in targeted outreach for said programs to underrepresented groups, utilizing data collected from relevant consultations.

Improved Outreach and Awareness

To improve outreach and awareness, the provincial government should work with MCURES to promote targeted outreach programs aimed at people who do not have their high school diploma or GED but wish to pursue further education. Students also recommend that the provincial government task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), with collecting data on long-term outcomes of outreach programs, focusing on effectiveness, graduation rates, retention, and barriers faced by participants, to inform future improvements and policies. Further, the provincial government should develop an online portal for all outreach programs that provides in-depth, accessible information on the available programs.

Also, the provincial government should develop grant funding for schools to visit post-secondary institutions on field trips.

OUSA recommends that the provincial government develop a grant for universities to create and enhance existing outreach programs that provide opportunities to meet post-secondary requirements. Additionally, MCURES should renew funding to account for inflation each year for the Ontario Post-Secondary Access and Inclusion Program (OPAIP) to allow post-secondary institutions to continue to use it to deliver enhanced outreach programs for students. Students also recommend that the provincial government task Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) with publishing best practice guidelines for post-secondary institutions' outreach initiatives, ensuring those initiatives support students and applicants' informed decision making on post-secondary pathways.

Students recommend that the provincial government should work with the federal government to allow for retroactive contributions to the RESP program for those born prior to 2024. The provincial government should invest in informational programs and campaigns for financial aid and existing scholarship databases to prospective students and their support systems. Further, the provincial government should, in consultation with third-party education organizations, develop a free online financial literacy course focused on saving for and understanding post-secondary education financing and loan payments.

Improved Support in K-12 Education

Students recommend that the Ministry of Education should extend de-streamed compulsory courses to grade 10 and all grade 9 courses, and ensure schools are adequately supported in the destreaming process. Further, they recommend that the Ministry of Education should mandate and support school boards that continue to offer streamed grade 10 courses in developing a strategic plan to provide grade nine students and their families with clear, accessible information on the distinction between academic and applied streams and their corresponding post-secondary pathways. Through advisory groups, the Ministry of Education should consult with educational staff, students and their families to understand a holistic view of school needs to create implementation policies and guidelines regarding streaming and switching streams. Lastly, the Ministry of Education should review the current curriculum for de-streamed grade nine core courses to ensure equal synthesis between academic and applied streams, with opportunities for additional learning.

OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Education regularly consult students and teachers at the secondary and post-secondary levels and collect data to monitor the effectiveness of recent changes to the Grade 10 Career Studies curriculum. The Ministry of Education should also extend Career Studies curriculum beyond Grade 10 and amend it to educate students about the outcomes of streaming decisions, in order to inform their decisions on post-secondary options and employment opportunities. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses with detailed guidelines explaining various post-secondary pathways and the viable employment opportunities that each pathway could lead to. The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses to ensure that the financial literacy skills needed to navigate post-secondary financial systems are taught. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses with detailed guidelines on how to establish co-ops, shadowing opportunities, summer jobs and internships to explore various career paths.

OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Education regularly update guidance resources to encompass the diverse post-secondary pathways in Ontario to ensure guidance counselors remain informed and unbiased on the varying ways to attain a higher education. Students further recommend that the Ministry of Education should 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. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should study guidance counsellors- to- student ration and provide funding to increase staffing and on-on-one support time. The Ministry of Education should also mandate and incorporate cultural sensitivity and anti-racism classroom supports for administrators, guidance counselors, and support staff into their strategic plan to ensure that all students are provided with an equitable and high-quality secondary education experience. Students recommend that the Ministry of Education should assess and address recruitment board biases and design pathways to facilitate licensing of educators from underrepresented groups to address the need for more support staff and the lack of diversity in school staff. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should commission research on the retention rates of BIPOC educational staff, the systemic barriers impeding BIPOC staff retention, and the growing need for BIPOC educational staff in rural and northern communities. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should provide grant funding for school boards to hire and recruit BIPOC educational staff according to local school and community needs. Students recommend that the Ministry of Education consult with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to fund and regulate their proposed mental health and well-being teams based on the student population.

OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Education provide grant funding for school boards to provide structured programming for students facing suspensions. The Ministry of Education should also mandate the meaningful collection and promotion of race-based data surrounding suspensions and expulsions. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should provide envelope funding to school boards to hire teaching staff to develop in-school, financially accessible tutoring centres in secondary schools. The Ministry of Education should provide increased funding for the expansion of mentorship and support programs in order to permit a wider reach to underrepresented populations. The Ministry of Education's Learning Recovery Action Plan should include specific actions to combat those who were disproportionately impacted by the shift to an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the provincial government should continue to invest in the Broadband Access for All Students Initiative as well as the expansion of broadband in public libraries in underserved communities. The Ministry of Education should create a consolidated grant for technology within the Grants for Student Needs to help purchase, maintain, and repair digital tools for secondary students.

OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Education fund needs-based scholarships and stipends for students to engage in extracurriculars. Also, the Ministry of Education should develop a grant that aims to provide schools and relevant community organizations with the required funding to run a broad array of affordable and accessible extra-curricular programs, as well as the associated supplies. Lastly, the provincial government should develop grant funding for post-secondary institutions to provide enrichment programming for K-12 students.

Build System Data and Information

To improve transparency, OUSA recommend that the provincial government make students aware of the data being collected throughout their education and continuously ask for consent throughout the data collection process. Further, 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. The expert panel referred to in the previous recommendation should be tasked with creating a framework for a common university reporting standard for demographic data on student applications, offers, acceptances, retention, and success. Additionally, the provincial government should collect self-identified data regarding access to post-secondary education on all relevant protected grounds under the Ontario Human Rights Code and adopt data privacy principles stated in the Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism. Students recommend that the provincial government, upon the advice of the expert panel, should establish robust metrics for access that should be tracked on both a recurring and longitudinal basis at both the institutional and provincial

levels. The provincial government should also amend the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to include, from consenting individuals, important demographic information necessary to further the goals of a comprehensive access strategy. Moreover, the provincial government should extend aspects of the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to post-secondary students to monitor access trends, alongside implementing a privacy policy for the protection of student demographic data. The provincial government should provide funding for HEQCO, in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and their community organizations, to develop community research partnerships in constituencies to track diverse student pathways unique to socio-geographic environments of institutions, while respecting student anonymity.

Students recommend that MCURES should contract the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to research access to the post-secondary system and publish this data regularly. The provincial government should also establish guidelines for post-secondary institutions to abide by when entering into an agreement with third-party platforms. Lastly, the provincial government should annually consult with primary, secondary, and post-secondary student advocacy groups on the centralization and dissemination of data related to student access and success.

INTRODUCTION

Access to post-secondary education is a multifaceted concept. In addition to increasing institutional capacity to accommodate the rising demand, it also involves ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have an equitable opportunity to pursue and succeed in post-secondary education. This policy paper focuses specifically on access for both Ontario students and Canadian domestic students more broadly. Although Ontario has made some progress in increasing its post-secondary capacity, not all students receive equal access in their pursuit of post-secondary education. Various demographic groups continue to encounter unique and compounding challenges that restrict their access and participation in higher education, including but not limited to students with disabilities, racialized students, Indigenous students, students with lower socioeconomic status, and rural and northern students.

Although financial costs can pose an obstacle for students attempting to access post-secondary education, barriers to accessing post-secondary education often exceed financial costs. These barriers may exist prior to when a student first applies to post-secondary institutions. Students may encounter challenges such as academic streaming, lack of timely and accurate information about opportunities, and receive limited guidance when making crucial decisions. Systemic factors that influence a student's feeling of belonging at post-secondary institutions further exacerbate these challenges. Despite an increase in overall enrolment, there has been limited progress in reducing the disparities in access and participation for underrepresented groups.

The decision to attend and pursue higher education is influenced early on in life. Students begin to develop expectations surrounding post-secondary education based on influences such as their home life, current school environment, and access to community resources. Opportunities to pursue higher education are further impacted when these supports are unevenly dispersed. Since decisions about

whether to pursue post-secondary education are made during the K-12 years, efforts to increase access at the post-secondary level or at the conclusion of high school are made too late.¹ In order to address equity, early interventions that address the unique needs of underrepresented students are necessary to ensure that access is supported along the entirety of the educational journey.

Access to post-secondary education has immediate and long-lasting effects on a student's academic experience, personal development, and future opportunities. Addressing the structural inequities that limit access is a prerequisite for creating a post-secondary system that is more responsive and inclusive.

¹ Deller, Fiona., and Rosanna Tamburri. 2019. Early Supports for Accessing Postsecondary Education: Good, Bad, or Indifferent. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/pub/early-supports-for-accessing-postsecondary-education-good-bad-or-indifferent/>

GLOSSARY

Access: Increasing access to and enrollment in post-secondary education specifically for underrepresented groups.

Bridging programs: Bridging programs are accreditation programs for individuals with foreign credentials and/or pre-existing post-secondary education from another country. It is utilized to certify their education and expedite their transition into the work force.

Disabilities: Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, a disability is “any degree of physical disability... a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability... a learning disability... a mental disorder... or an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed.” The Code includes anticipated disabilities in its definition, signalling the need to take proactive measures to accommodate students who may develop a disability. This paper uses the Code definition of disability and is inclusive of both visible and invisible disabilities.²

Elementary and secondary education: The terms “primary,” “elementary,” “secondary,” and “high school” refer to various stages of education from grades K-12.

Extracurriculars: Activities performed by students, that falls outside the normal academic curriculum

Equality: “[E]quality means that all segments of society have the same level of support and opportunity. This means that regardless of one’s gender, race, sex, religion, etc., opportunities remain the same. It ensures that people in different social statuses or groups will not be discriminated against.”³

Equity: Equity is a “condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences.”⁴ Additionally, “[E]quity refers to the fact that different people have varying needs of support and assistance... The goal of equity is to help achieve fairness in treatment and outcomes.”⁵

First-generation students: Students whose parents do not have a Bachelor’s degree or higher education certification. Although immigrant students may be attending post-secondary in Ontario for the first time, if their parents completed post-secondary education, they would not be included in our definition of first-generation students.

Lower socioeconomic status: In this policy paper, “lower socioeconomic status” refers to individuals from families whose combined annual income is less than \$50,000. This is based on Statistics Canada’s Low-Income Measure for a four-person household, before tax.⁶

² Ontario Human Rights Commission, Policy on ableism and discrimination based on disability (Ontario Human Rights Commission, June 2016)

³ University of the People. “Equity vs Equality.” University of the People Blog. Accessed July 17, 2025. <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/equity-vs-equality/>.

⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education. Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2009. PDF. Updated January 13, 2022. Accessed July 17, 2025. <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-equity-inclusive-education-strategy-2009-en-2022-01-13.pdf>.

⁵ University of the People. “Equity vs Equality.” University of the People Blog. Accessed July 17, 2025. <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/equity-vs-equality/>.

⁶ Statistics Canada. *Low income measure (LIM) thresholds by income source and household size*. Retrieved November 26, 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110023201>.

Mature students: In this policy paper, “mature students” refers to individuals who have been out of high school for six or more years at the start of their study period, or who have worked full-time for at least 24 months in a row. This is loosely based on the current provincial OSAP definition for independent students, since the mature student definition varies from institution to institution and federal funding categorizes independent students as individuals who have been out of high school for four or more years.

Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs): Documents established through negotiations with MCURES that provide universities and colleges with an opportunity to communicate priorities, identify areas of institutional strength/focus, and set performance metrics. Historically, some degree of public university funding has been determined by SMAs.⁷

Streaming: The process of secondary school students choosing between academic and applied streams, and later university and college streams, in Ontario’s public education system.

Support staff: Support staff in Ontario School Boards include employees who support students and schools through various domains.⁸ Support Staff Role Categories include: clerical (e.g. office staff), administrative (e.g. Student Data Info Administrators), technical (e.g. IT), student supervisors (e.g. lunch hour/recess supervisors) classroom instructors (e.g. ESL Instructor), classroom assistants (e.g. Recreation assistants), mental health supports (e.g. Psychologists), educational assistants, early childhood educators, behavioural analysts, librarians, caretaking and maintenance, skilled trades (e.g. Certified Trades HVAC) and professional student service roles (e.g. Social Workers, Speech-Language Pathologists, Student Equity Program Advisors, Occupational Therapists, etc.).⁹

Systemic oppression: Systemic oppression is the intentional disadvantaging of certain groups based on their identity while advantaging members of the dominant group (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.). It manifests in economic, social, political and cultural systems, and exists at the level of institutions (harmful policies and practices) and across structures (education, health, transportation, economy, etc.) that are interconnected and reinforcing over time.¹⁰

Underrepresented students, students from underrepresented groups: Students from demographic groups that have a lower percentage of participation in post-secondary education when compared to the percentage of participation in post-secondary of the general population. For the context of this paper, “underrepresented” should be understood only in the context of participation in post-secondary education, not other aspects of society. It is important to note that, while some marginalized populations may be underrepresented within the post-secondary system, the terms “marginalized” and “underrepresented” are not synonymous and are not used interchangeably in this paper. In particular, policy makers often refer to underrepresented groups in post-secondary education as including: those from low-income

⁷ Ryerson University. *Strategic Mandate Agreement*. Retrieved November 26, 2020. [https://www.ryerson.ca/provost/strategic-plans/strategic-mandate-agreement/#:~:text=Strategic%20Mandate%20Agreements%20\(SMAs\)%20are,focus%2C%20and%20set%20performance%20metrics](https://www.ryerson.ca/provost/strategic-plans/strategic-mandate-agreement/#:~:text=Strategic%20Mandate%20Agreements%20(SMAs)%20are,focus%2C%20and%20set%20performance%20metrics).

⁸ London District Catholic School Board. “Staff Directory.” Accessed July 17, 2025. London District Catholic School Board. <https://www.ldcsb.ca/apps/pages/staff/>; Catholic Independent Schools of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie. “Qualified Grades and Support Staff.” PDF, 2022. Accessed July 17, 2025. Catholic Independent Schools of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie. https://cdss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/gg_support-staff.pdf.

⁹ Toronto District School Board. “Professional Student Services.” Permanent and Other Opportunities. Accessed July 17, 2025. Toronto District School Board.

<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/About-Us/Employment/Support-Staff/Permanent-and-Other-Opportunities/Professional-Student-Services>.

¹⁰ National Equity Project. *The Lens of Systemic Oppression*. Retrieved November 26, 2020.

[https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression/#:~:text=Systemic%20oppression%20is%20systematic%20and,%2C%20language%2C%20etc.\)](https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression/#:~:text=Systemic%20oppression%20is%20systematic%20and,%2C%20language%2C%20etc.)).

families; first-generation students, those from rural and northern communities, those from single-parent families, or those with disabilities, among other marginalized populations.¹¹

Willing and qualified students: In this policy, “willing and qualified students” refers to individuals who have a desire to attend post-secondary education and who have met the relevant admission requirements for doing so.

¹¹ Finnie, Ross. “Under-Represented Groups in Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence from the Youth in Transition Survey,” *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)*. 2011. Retrieved November 26, 2020. <http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/UnderRepdGroupsENG.pdf>.

CREATING A COMPREHENSIVE PROVINCIAL ACCESS STRATEGY

Principle: All willing and qualified individuals in Ontario should be able to access post-secondary education.

Principle: All prospective students should be able to benefit from the enhancement of employment and career opportunities, as well as broadened pathways for upward economic and social advancement that post-secondary education can provide.

Principle: Equitable access to post-secondary education should extend beyond admission, requiring ongoing comprehensive support to ensure students complete their degrees and receive the full benefits of post-secondary education.

Concern: Underrepresented groups face unique and compounding barriers in accessing and completing post-secondary education, limiting opportunities for qualified individuals and contributing to disproportionately high non-completion rates.

Recommendation: The provincial government should implement an access strategy in conjunction with equity-focused, targeted retention and completion strategies that address the unique needs of students, alongside relevant accountability mechanisms, to ensure students are able to attain the full benefits of post-secondary education.

According to 2024 data, Statistics Canada reported a 31 percent higher rate of unemployment amongst those who obtained only a high school diploma, as compared to those holding Bachelors degrees in Ontario.¹² As well, the Canadian government estimates that by 2028, roughly 68 percent of new jobs will require some post-secondary credential.¹³ As the number of jobs requiring higher education increases, the provincial government will need to keep up with the growing demographics by ensuring that post-secondary institutions are able to meet demand. Further, in order to ensure that this access remains equitable, they will need to address systemic barriers that restrict access for certain demographic populations, as well as create targeted solutions to address these inequities. These statistics explicitly demonstrate that access to post-secondary education, specifically university institutions, broadens opportunities for upward economic and social advancement. All prospective students should be able to access post-secondary education, and therefore benefit from the enhancement of employment and career opportunities, as well as broadened pathways for upward economic and social advancement that post-secondary education can provide. As such, a comprehensive access strategy will be imperative to ensuring that underrepresented groups are not excluded from an increasingly highly educated labour force.

The term “access,” as it pertains to post-secondary education, can be elusive and difficult to define. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) defines access in two ways: increasing the system’s capacity to accommodate all interested students, and specific initiatives targeted at those who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.¹⁴ Post-secondary enrollment in Ontario has been on the rise for many years now, as Ontario performs very well with the growth model. However, certain

¹² Statistics Canada, *Unemployment rate, participation rate and employment rate by educational attainment, annual*, January 27, 2025,

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410002001&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.7&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.8&pickMembers%5B2%5D=4.1&pickMembers%5B3%5D=5.3&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2022&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2024&referencePeriods=20220101%2C20240101>.

¹³ Government of Canada, *Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS) - 2024 to 2033 projections*, Open Canada, accessed June 23, 2025, <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/e80851b8-de68-43bd-a85c-c72e1b3a3890#wb-auto-6>.

¹⁴ Fiona Deller, Amy Kaufman, and Rosanna Tamburri, *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2019), <https://www.heqco.ca/pub/redefining-access-to-postsecondary-education/>

groups in Ontario are underrepresented in post-secondary education and face unique barriers that restrict access for qualified individuals.

Only 55 percent of students with parents in the bottom income quintile were enrolled in post-secondary education, compared to 84 percent with parents in the top income quintile.¹⁵ This is because high tuition fees and indirect costs, such as housing, transportation, and childcare, pose significant financial and systemic barriers. These financial barriers faced by these students are exacerbated by systemic inequities that intersect with other marginalized identities, such as race, disability, geographic location. The lowest post-secondary participation rates are for individuals who identified as Indigenous at about 34 percent, compared to 54 percent of white Canadians.¹⁶ These statistics explicitly demonstrate that students from underrepresented groups face unique and compounding barriers in accessing and completing post-secondary education, limiting opportunities for qualified individuals and contributing to disproportionately high non-completion rates.

Extensive research and student testimony demonstrates the persistence of non-financial factors that continue to pose barriers to postsecondary education for certain demographic populations in Ontario.¹⁷ Low academic performance, greater high school dropout rates, low interest and belief in the value of higher education, and insufficient encouragement from parents and peers are just a few examples of the barriers that persist for traditionally under-represented groups.¹⁸ Much of this is exacerbated throughout the secondary school system, which occurs through structures that include, but are not limited to, Ontario's use of a streaming system, a lack of bias training in university guidance counsellors, administration, and support staff, as well as an overall lack of access to information about one's options for post-secondary education. Ontario's enrolment growth has not been adequate in its ability to reduce participation gaps for underrepresented groups, prioritizing general enrollment over targeted improvements for those most in need.

The provincial government should publicly commit to increasing equitable access to post-secondary education for underrepresented groups by developing a comprehensive access strategic plan that reduces barriers and addresses the unique needs of different underrepresented groups. Much of this strategy should be done through modifications to the current university funding model, which is currently focused primarily on growth, and ties institutional funding to performance outcomes, such as job placement rates or research outputs. The provincial government should instead adopt an equity-focused funding model that prioritizes investments in closing the participation gap and improving access for underrepresented groups.

The overarching goals of this strategy should be public accountability, and it should be developed in close consultation with students and individuals from affected populations. Such a strategic plan should be specific and include targeted policy objectives that directly translate to better outcomes for traditionally under-represented groups. Each of the underrepresented groups discussed in this paper should be uniquely accounted for, given the unique barriers experienced by each one. In order to do so, the provincial government should clearly define access to mean reducing barriers and increasing enrolment

¹⁵ Michael Frenette, Postsecondary Enrolment by Parental Income: Recent National and Provincial Trends, Economic Insights, no. 70 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Social Analysis and Modelling Division, July 2017), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2017070-eng.htm>.

¹⁶ Higher Education Strategy Associates, State of Postsecondary Education in Canada 2024 (SPEC 2024) (Toronto: Higher Education Strategy Associates, September 4, 2024), https://higheredsstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024-09-04_SPEC-2024_v2_Publications.pdf.

¹⁷ Fiona Deller, Amy Kaufman, and Rosanna Tamburri, Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2019), <https://www.heqco.ca/pub/redefining-access-to-postsecondary-education/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

specifically for underrepresented groups. Equitable access to post-secondary extends beyond admission, and requires ongoing comprehensive support. As such, this access strategy must be implemented in conjunction with equity-focused, targeted retention, and completion strategies that address the unique needs of underrepresented students, to ensure students are able to complete their degrees and attain the full benefits of post-secondary education. Many of OUSA's other policy stances detail our recommendations for various comprehensive supports that both institutions and the provincial government should be providing their students throughout their time in post-secondary.¹⁹ Comprehensive and equitable access to post-secondary starts long before a student accepts their offer to attend a given program, and extends throughout the duration of their degree.

Given that post-secondary education is undeniably a tool for upward economic and social advancement in Ontario, it is essential that the government commit to equalizing the opportunity to participate for all demographic groups. In order to prevent persistent cycles of inequality and systemic disadvantages among underrepresented groups, a proactive strategy is essential to ensure that all students interested in participating in post-secondary education are able to access it. Herein, OUSA discusses specific approaches to eliminating barriers that restrict access.

ACCESS FOR STUDENTS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

OVERVIEW

Principle: All willing and qualified students should have equitable access to post-secondary education in a safe and inclusive environment with supports and programs that respect their diverse identities and experiences.

Principle: Students from underrepresented groups should have equitable opportunities to navigate and access the diverse pathways within the post-secondary system.

Principle: Students from underrepresented groups should be supported in navigating intersecting and compounding systemic barriers that may impact their access into post-secondary education.

Concern: Students with intersecting identities face compounded systemic challenges and biases which hinders access to post-secondary education.

Concern: Students from underrepresented groups may have disproportionately low access to information or equitable outreach opportunities when understanding post-secondary pathways.

Concern: Enrolment growth has failed to reduce participation gaps for underrepresented groups, prioritizing general enrollment and maximizing revenue per student over equitable targeted improvements for those most in need.

Concern: Needs-based means tested financial aid programs do not equitably value lived experiences, financial realities and systemic barriers of students.

Concern: Prevalence of discrimination, microaggressions, and unsafe spaces on campuses and in communities create an environment where marginalized students do not feel valued or supported, impacting their decision to access post-secondary education.

¹⁹ Find more of OUSA's policy library here: <https://www.ousa.ca/policies>

Concern: Barriers in the application process, such as financial barriers, lack of guidance and promotion, when applying to multiple and/or high cost programs, impede access for underrepresented students into post-secondary education.

Concern: First-generation students face informational barriers and may lack the financial support required to prepare and assist them for post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should require post-secondary institutions to develop and report on enrollment and outreach strategies for underrepresented groups to inform equity-based funding for Strategic Mandate Agreements.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should expand the current OSAP bursary programs for underrepresented students that aims to cover the cost of preparatory prerequisites.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should re-evaluate needs-based means testing and repayment plans for provincial financial aid programs to equitably value financial challenges and systemic barriers faced by underrepresented students.

Recommendation: The provincial government should meaningfully consult with underrepresented students to refine existing policies and increase resources to fund and supports programs that enable students to select their preferred post-secondary pathway.

Recommendation: The provincial government should promote databases and programs through the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) portal for families and students when aspiring to access post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions offer targeted scholarships towards underrepresented students through earmarked envelope funding.

Ontario's post-secondary landscape includes universities, colleges, Indigenous Institutes, apprenticeships, and certificate programs, yet not all students receive equal support in understanding or accessing these pathways. Access to post-secondary education remains a fundamental pathway to economic mobility, personal development, and societal participation. However, this remains deeply inequitable for students from underrepresented groups. This reflects not only financial disparities but also systemic and cultural barriers embedded within the education system and society at large. Student identities are multifaceted and it is necessary for institutional policies to be nuanced and adaptive rather than one-size-fits-all. Equity is not merely about opening doors but ensuring those doors lead to welcoming spaces where students feel safe, valued, and capable of thriving.

Financial aid programs are essential mechanisms for improving access to post-secondary education among underrepresented student groups in Ontario. However, existing financial aid systems often fail to equitably account for the diverse lived experiences, financial realities, and systemic barriers faced by students from marginalized backgrounds. These shortcomings create significant impediments in the application process and limit the ability of underrepresented students to access post-secondary education and the preparatory pathways that lead there. Preparatory prerequisites – such as upgrading courses, summer school, and bridging programs – are disproportionately utilized by underrepresented groups, and currently, bursary programs targeting these preparatory costs are limited. With that, MCURES should expand the current Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) bursary programs for underrepresented students that aims to cover the cost of preparatory prerequisites, as it is critical in enabling equitable access and reducing early attrition in post-secondary education.

OSAP utilizes needs-based, means-tested criteria that calculates funding eligibility largely based on household income and basic financial circumstances. While this system aims to prioritize those with the greatest financial need, it inadequately captures the complex realities experienced by many underrepresented students. For instance, students from multigenerational households or those responsible for dependents may have financial burdens not reflected in income-based assessments. Additionally, students with disabilities often encounter extra costs related to assistive devices, specialized transportation, and accommodations that are excluded from OSAP's standard calculations. According to a 2023 report by MCURES, nearly 30 percent of OSAP recipients still face unmet financial need after aid disbursement, with Indigenous students, racialized students, and students with disabilities disproportionately represented among those with ongoing financial shortfalls.²⁰ Similarly, a 2022 study by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations reported that OSAP's means-tested framework does not sufficiently accommodate the unique financial circumstances of students from rural and northern communities, first-generation students, and Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ populations.²¹ This is why the province should mandate targeted scholarships funded through earmarked envelope allocations at post-secondary institutions. By offering scholarships specifically for underrepresented students, institutions can reduce the financial burden associated with pursuing higher education and encourage wider participation from diverse populations. Notably, when students receive identity-based awards, they are often considered as income or assets during OSAP calculations, resulting in a reduction of funding. This negates the financial benefit of such scholarships, discouraging students from applying for additional awards designed to address equity gaps. In fact, 40 percent of students receiving targeted scholarships reported OSAP clawbacks, reducing the net support they received and disincentivizing them to seek out supplementary funding.²² These systemic shortcomings reduce the effectiveness of financial aid as a tool for equitable access. Therefore, MCURES should re-evaluate needs-based means testing and repayment plans for provincial financial aid programs to equitably value financial challenges and systemic barriers faced by underrepresented students.

Beyond the structure of financial aid itself, barriers in the application process further impede underrepresented students' access to post-secondary education. Application fees represent a significant financial hurdle while gaps in intergenerational knowledge transmission pose informational barriers. According to a 2021 survey by People for Education, nearly 35 percent of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds identified application fees as a key obstacle in applying to their preferred post-secondary programs.²³ Furthermore, a 2023 Ontario Postsecondary Access Network study found that over 60 percent of first-generation students felt unprepared for the application process due to lack of information or mentorship, with many unaware of bursaries and support programs available to them.²⁴ This also includes the inability to attend university or campus fairs where institutions typically disseminate some of this information. These informational deficits compound existing financial obstacles, amplifying the risk of disengagement and limiting students' post-secondary choices. This is why the provincial government should enhance access to post-secondary information by promoting centralized databases and program guides through platforms such as the OUAC. Navigable resources on academic programs, financial aid opportunities, and career pathways (like the recently released *My Career Journey* portal from MCURES) would help demystify the application process and empower students to make informed choices aligned with their interests and needs, particularly for first-generation and rural students.

²⁰ Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES), Ontario Student Assistance Program Annual Report 2023 (Toronto: Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES), 2023), 22.

²¹ Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, *The Equity in Student Aid Report*, (Ottawa: CASA, 2022), 15–18.

²² Ibid, 23.

²³ People for Education, *Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Ontario*, (Toronto: People for Education, 2021), 10.

²⁴ Ontario Postsecondary Access Network, First-Generation Student Experience Survey, (Toronto: OPAN, 2023), 8.

Access to post-secondary education is also influenced by the social and cultural environments in which students learn, and the availability of accessible, transparent information regarding educational pathways. One persistent concern is the prevalence of discrimination, microaggressions, and unsafe spaces within post-secondary institutions and the surrounding communities. According to a 2022 survey by the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), 57 percent of racialized students in Ontario reported encountering racism on campus, while 39 percent of Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ students expressed feeling unsafe in their academic environments.²⁵ Such findings reflect broader systemic issues that extend beyond isolated incidents, pointing to institutional cultures and practices that fail to adequately promote inclusivity and safety. These factors have a profound impact on students' decisions to pursue or continue post-secondary education, with many citing experiences of discrimination and exclusion as reasons for non-enrollment, transfer, or withdrawal.²⁶ Creating safer and more inclusive campuses requires meaningful engagement with underrepresented students to ensure that policies and programs respond authentically to their lived realities. The provincial government should actively consult these students, drawing on their insights to refine existing equity policies and allocate increased resources toward programs that support diverse post-secondary pathways. These may include expanded equity-based student services, culturally relevant mentorship programs, targeted mental health supports, and mandatory inclusion and anti-racism training for faculty and administrative staff. Much of these suggestions were alluded to in the directives sent by the Ministry to institutions in 2024 as a result of the *Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act, 2024*. By centering student voices in policy development and resource allocation, institutions can foster environments where all students feel valued and supported, which is essential for equitable access and retention.²⁷

As well, students from marginalized groups frequently have limited access to guidance and outreach programs that help them understand the diversity of academic and career pathways available. This lack of information is compounded by systemic issues such as underfunded schools in lower-income and rural areas, fewer career counseling resources, and minimal representation in outreach efforts.²⁸ A 2020 report by People for Education found that students in rural and lower-income schools in Ontario were 40% less likely to receive counseling about post-secondary options compared to their counterparts in higher-income urban schools.²⁹ Although Ontario has experienced an increase in university enrollment over the past decade, this growth has not significantly closed participation gaps for underrepresented groups. New enrollments to university from Indigenous students has decreased in greater numbers than those from non-Indigenous students, highlighting that general enrollment expansion tends to benefit students already positioned to access post-secondary education rather than those facing systemic barriers.³⁰ This trend underscores the need for targeted enrollment and outreach strategies that specifically address the barriers faced by underrepresented communities. In response, MCURES should require post-secondary institutions to develop, implement, and publicly report on enrollment and outreach strategies that focus on equity-deserving groups. These strategies should prioritize partnerships with schools, community organizations, and Indigenous groups in underserved regions to enhance awareness and support for prospective students. Such accountability measures would allow for data-driven adjustments in funding and program delivery, ensuring that Strategic Mandate Agreements incentivize institutions to meaningfully reduce participation gaps and value equity-based funding metrics.

²⁵ Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), *Campus Climate Survey* (2022).

²⁶ Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), *Barriers to Access Report* (2023).

²⁷ Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES), *Equity and Inclusion Policy Framework* (2024).

²⁸ People for Education, *Access and Opportunity in Ontario Schools* (2020).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sophie Lanthier, Alana Button, and Amy Kaufman, *Ontario's Domestic Postsecondary Enrolment: Examining Recent Trends to Inform Policy and Planning* (Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario), 2025, <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Demographics-FORMATTED.pdf>

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Principle: Opportunities for self-advocacy and access to social support groups can contribute to better experiences for students with disabilities, but are not substitutes for disability-inclusive practices and environments.

Principle: Equitable, accessible, and inclusive access to post-secondary education for students with disabilities, enhances possible employment and career outcomes.

Principle: Invisible disabilities should be better recognized in accommodations processes and adequate resources should be dedicated to fulfilling them.

Principle: Students with disabilities should have fair and equitable access to post-secondary education, including support and accommodations tailored to their specific needs.

Concern: Post-secondary institutions may inaccurately or inadequately communicate their available accommodations, and changes to them, for students with disabilities.

Concern: Lack of accessible infrastructure and reasonable accommodations during elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education may limit students' ability to pursue their post-secondary pathway of choice.

Concern: Students with invisible disabilities face unique challenges that may impact their academic success and access to accommodations

Concern: Students with undiagnosed disabilities may be unable to get a diagnosis due to their financial, logistical, cultural, administrative, and bureaucratic barriers, leading to their accessibility requests being denied.

Concern: A lack of disability inclusion in physical, social, and decision-making environments limits the ability of students with disabilities to attend, participate, and succeed in post-secondary institutions.

Concern: Aging infrastructure, as worsened by Ontario's deferred maintenance backlog, coupled with insufficient accessibility services disproportionately limits access options for students with disabilities.

Concern: Primary and secondary education for students with disabilities does not adequately prioritize the development of essential skills needed for their long-term success.

Recommendation: The provincial government should modify the existing OSAP funding structure to reimburse students seeking diagnosis regardless of diagnostic results.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide appreciable funding to the Facilities Renewal Program for the implementation of repairs and modifications of physical infrastructure to meet the accessibility needs of students.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide additional grant funding to implement accessible physical infrastructure modifying existing physical infrastructure to meet students accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide additional grant funding to support initiatives that aim to modify academic processes to meet student accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions.

Recommendation: The provincial government should develop a system for evaluating and verifying accessibility supports at individual post-secondary institutions and present this information in a central location.

Recommendation: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to review the effectiveness of programming and support for students with disabilities to ensure academic skill development is a focus.

Recommendation: The provincial government should incentivize the implementation of transition programs between primary, secondary education, and post-secondary education to support students with disabilities.

Recommendation: The provincial government should mandate post-secondary institutions to publish standardized, easily accessible guides outlining all available accommodations.

Recommendation: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to publish best practices guidelines on student accommodations to help students know when institutions are providing accommodations and to better support students' self advocacy.

The post-secondary education system continues to have a significantly low representation of students with disabilities. According to the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) 2020 Undergraduate Student Survey (OUSS), only 27 percent of respondents reported having a disability.³¹ This indicates that students with disabilities are likely underrepresented in the post-secondary education landscape. To address gaps that students with disabilities may encounter, the implementation of a comprehensive, system-wide framework is necessary. This framework should acknowledge the wide range of visible and invisible disabilities while also confronting the systemic and procedural barriers that exist.

The ability of students with disabilities to access post-secondary education in an equitable, inclusive, and accessible manner has a direct impact on long-term employment and career success. Students who cannot access or successfully complete higher education because of inadequate accommodations are at a lifelong disadvantage. Graduates with disabilities have reported facing significantly worse labour market outcomes compared to those without a disability.³² Unemployment rates for recent graduates with disabilities are at 16.7 percent compared to the six percent of unemployed recent graduates without disabilities.³³ Post-secondary education is sometimes a requirement for obtaining employment. Approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of all job openings will require post-secondary education.³⁴ It is also estimated that in three decades, jobs requiring a university education will have increased by 145 percent.³⁵ However, post-secondary institutions have placed the burden on students to navigate accommodations and resources on their own. Opportunities for social support and self-advocacy can enhance the educational experience when paired with disability-inclusive policies that are actively incorporated into the educational system.

Information regarding accessibility on university campuses is often inconsistent and unclear.³⁶ This makes it difficult for students who are determining their future in higher education to identify an institution that has the infrastructure and facilities necessary to accommodate their accessibility needs. Institutions sometimes fail to provide clear, standardized, and easily accessible information about what accommodations are offered, the process of applying to accommodations, and whether they are sufficient to satisfy a student's requirements. According to OUSA's OUSS survey, 22 percent of respondents had

³¹ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). 2022. "Quality: Results from the 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey." Toronto: Research Report. https://www.ousa.ca/reports_ouss_2020_quality

³² Chatoor, Ken. 2021. *Postsecondary Credential Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes for Ontario Students with Disabilities*. Toronto: Research Report. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/pub/postsecondary-credential-attainment-and-labour-market-outcomes-for-ontario-students-with-disabilities/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ontario's Universities. 2023. "Future-Proofing Ontario's Students." <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/news/fostering-talent-to-navigate-ontarios-shifting-economy/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Wilkinson, Ambre, and Jason P. Martens. 2024. "Not Overly Accessible: Accessibility Services at Universities Across Canada." *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 13 (3), 194-225. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v13i3.1166>

requested academic accommodations, of which 60 percent received academic accommodation for disability support.³⁷ Students with disabilities may be deterred from enrolling in programs at institutions that appear to be accommodating of their needs, but fail to provide clear and accessible information. The provincial government should mandate post-secondary institutions to publish standardized, easily accessible guides outlining all available accommodations. Additionally, the provincial government should task the HEQCO to publish best practices guidelines on student accommodations to help students know when institutions are providing accommodations and to better support students' self-advocacy.

Accommodation frameworks that are based on conventional models of visible disabilities often do not account for students with invisible disabilities. Offices for Students with Disabilities (OSDs) registrations have been significantly increasing over the past decade.³⁸ Mental health and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) registrations have increased by 76 percent and 107 percent, respectively over the past few years.³⁹ This growing trend demonstrates a growing prevalence of invisible disabilities in post-secondary institutions. Institutions should acknowledge invisible disabilities and allocate sufficient funds to better support and meet the needs of students. The provincial government should provide additional grant funding to support initiatives that aim to modify academic processes to meet student accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, students with undiagnosed disabilities also face additional challenges. In order to receive accommodations, students are often required to obtain a formal diagnosis. However, factors such as financial, cultural, administrative, and bureaucratic barriers can prevent students from accessing the necessary proofs. This ultimately limits a student's ability to receive the supports they need to succeed in higher education.

Although OSAP currently offers some reimbursement for diagnostic testing through, for example, the Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD), applicants are required to pay for the evaluation up front. Students would only receive reimbursement if the results verify a permanent or persistent/prolonged disability.⁴⁰ Low-income and marginalized students are disproportionately impacted which may deter them from seeking a formal diagnosis and any necessary modifications. Formal assessments for some disabilities are expensive, and some students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may likely have trouble navigating this cost alongside the bureaucratic process of obtaining the accommodation.⁴¹ If students are unable to receive a diagnosis, it can lead to inadequate support, accommodations, or programs that a student may need while completing their education.⁴² Therefore, the provincial government should modify the existing OSAP funding structure to reimburse students seeking diagnosis regardless of diagnostic results.

Although the government has invested \$209 million in post-secondary infrastructure to support critical maintenance, repairs, upgrades, and renewals,⁴³ outdated and sometimes inaccessible infrastructure

³⁷ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). 2022. "Accessibility: Results from the 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Survey. Toronto: Research Report. https://www.ousa.ca/reports_ouss_2020_accessibility

³⁸ Lanthier, Sophie., Ryan Tishcoff, Spencer Gordon, Julia Colyar. 2023. *Accessibility Services at Ontario Colleges and Universities: Trends, Challenges, and Recommendations for Government Funding Strategies*. Toronto: Research Report. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Accessibility-Services-at-Ontario-Colleges-and-Universities-FINAL-English.pdf>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD) and Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment – Students with Disabilities (CSG-DSE)" Retrieved June 25, 2025. https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/A-ZListofAid/POCONT1_077472

⁴¹ Karasewich, Tara. 2024. "Accessibility in Higher Education." <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/futureofhighereducation/chapter/accessibility-in-higher-education/>

⁴² Employment Accessibility Resource Network. 2020. "Improving Employment Outcomes for Post-Secondary Graduates with Disabilities: Summary Report." <https://earn-paire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/YwD-Report-Eng.pdf>

⁴³ "Published Plans and Annual Reports 2023-2024: Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES)." 2023. Ontario Newsroom. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/published-plans-and-annual-reports-2023-2024-ministry-colleges-and-universities>

often exacerbates the challenges faced by students with disabilities. Physical barriers can prevent students with physical disabilities from accessing learning environments.⁴⁴ Students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by Ontario's deferred maintenance backlog which continues to restrict an institution's ability to carry out significant repairs. The provincial government should provide appreciable funding to the Facilities Renewable Program for the implementation of repairs and modifications of physical infrastructure to meet the accessibility needs of students. Furthermore, the provincial government should provide additional grant funding to implement accessible physical infrastructure modifying existing physical infrastructure to meet students accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions.

The provincial government should develop a system for evaluating and verifying accessibility supports at individual post-secondary institutions and present this information in a central location. In order for prospective students to select which post-secondary institution is most suitable for their needs, it is imperative that this information should be made publicly available. A general culture of exclusion in the physical, social, and decision-making environments remains. According to Statistics Canada, 60 percent of youth with a diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorder and 40 percent of youth with mental health conditions were enrolling in post-secondary education.⁴⁵ Systemic ableism has led to the exclusion of students with disabilities from fully participating in higher education.⁴⁶ Students with disabilities may experience hostility and lack the necessary accommodations alongside an inaccessible campus.⁴⁷ They are also often discouraged by others from pursuing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields.⁴⁸ Students with disabilities are not able to fully participate in higher education unless deliberate efforts are made to involve them in campus life and institutional governance.

A students' ability to select and follow their preferred post-secondary path is often restricted by a lack of accessible infrastructure and suitable accommodations during elementary and secondary school which leads to exclusion from learning opportunities. 73 percent of children who were fully excluded from school were kept home because the necessary accommodations were not available.⁴⁹ These interruptions create barriers to academic preparedness needed to thrive in higher education. Additionally, the development of critical academic and self-advocacy skills necessary for long-term success is not often given priority during these educational years. It was indicated by participants in a project at a university in Nova Scotia that self-advocacy had taught them how important it is to understand their disability, and use that knowledge to shape learning contexts.⁵⁰ The provincial government should incentivize the implementation of transition programs between primary, secondary, and post-secondary education to support students with disabilities. This would allow students with disabilities to develop the social and intellectual skills necessary to succeed in higher education while also offering ongoing support. In addition, the provincial government should task the HEQCO to review the effectiveness of programming and support for students with disabilities to ensure academic skill development is a focus.

⁴⁴ "Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities." 2018. Ontario Human Rights Commission. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-accessible-education-students-disabilities>

⁴⁵ Parekh, Gillian., Robert Brown, David Walters, Ryan Collis, and Naleni Jacob. 2022. "Barriers Faced by Students with Disabilities." *Employment and Social Development Canada*. https://homelesshub.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Research-Summary_Students-with-Disabilities.pdf

⁴⁶ Government of Canada. 2022. "Findings from CIHR Environmental Scan on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism in Research Funding Systems (2021-2022)." *Canadian Institutes of Health Research*. <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/53280.html>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Promises Unfulfilled: Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario." 2025. Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/etfo/pages/2637/attachments/original/1742321292/PLC_PromisesUnfulfilled_FULL_March11.pdf?1742321292

⁵⁰ Bruce, Cynthia and M. Lynn Aylward. 2021. "Disability and Self-Advocacy Experiences in University Learning Contexts." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 23 (1): 14-26. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.741>.

RACIALIZED STUDENTS

Principle: Racialized students should feel safe in their communities and have student experiences free from the disproportionate harms of systemic racism, discrimination, and reinforced stereotypes to their student experience.

Principle: Racialized students should feel represented and supported with the necessary resources and guidance to make informed decisions in the pursuit of their preferred education and career pathways.

Principle: Racialized students should feel represented and supported with the necessary resources and guidance to make informed decisions to pursue their preferred education and career pathways.

Concern: Systemic racism and discrimination has significantly impacted racialized students in accessing post-secondary education.

Concern: Cuts to certain academic programs and research funding (i.e. social science and humanities) disproportionately impacts racialized students by limiting their access to programs that align with their career aspirations and educational ambitions.

Concern: Reinforced stereotypes associated with students' race or culture combined with a lack of representation amongst those in post-secondary may lead students to not pursue their preferred post-secondary pathway.

Recommendation: The provincial government should assemble an advisory committee of diverse racialized students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community leaders to consult on representation of racialized students and educational outcomes at the post-secondary level.

Recommendation: The provincial government should create a special purpose grant that would support institutions to sustain courses and programs that enable academic pursuit and dialogue around justice, reconciliation and humanity.

Recommendation: The provincial government should amend section 20 (8) of the MTCU Act to mandate institutional collection and publication of disaggregated race-based data every three years.

Racialized students continue to encounter overlapping and systemic barriers when accessing post-secondary education. These challenges are long-standing inequities that can influence how racialized students are streamed, supported, and represented throughout their academic journey. In a survey conducted by the OUSA, racialized students have felt less comfortable and safe on campus which ultimately hindered their access to many areas of post-secondary.⁵¹ In the same survey through a report from Wilfrid Laurier University, 40.5 percent of participants expressed experiencing racism, most commonly in the classroom and residence.⁵² Racialized students should feel safe in their communities and have student experiences free from the disproportionate harms of systemic racism, discrimination, and reinforced stereotypes to their student experience.

Racialized students' access to post-secondary education has been significantly impacted by systemic racism and discrimination. This often begins in the K-12 system, where perceptions about ability, which is often shaped by racial bias, may influence streaming and limit a student's future academic opportunities. 54 percent of students who have been suspended at least once in Grades K-8 have been found not

⁵¹ De Costa, Britney, Malika Dhanani, and Shemar Hackett. Accessibility: Results from the 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey. Research Report. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022. https://www.ousa.ca/reports_ouss_2020_accessibility

⁵² Ibid.

applying for post-secondary education.⁵³ According to research, racialized students perceive disciplinary measures as part of a larger system of surveillance to unfairly target racialized students.⁵⁴ Discriminatory attitudes among teachers continue despite the de-streaming of Grade 9 courses. Students have reported being pressured by school staff into choosing specific academic tracks even when those tracks did not align with their own personal goals.⁵⁵ This disproportionately affects racialized students' access to post-secondary education due to an inequitable level of quality in primary and secondary schooling. Among 12 students that participated in a study performed by Zareey (2013), 11 students were in tracks that did not align with their own goals.⁵⁶ Stereotypes may impact a teacher's assumption about a student's academic ability leading them onto paths that do not meet the post-secondary prerequisites.

Since ratifying this policy paper, the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) "Dreams Delayed: Addressing Systemic Anti-Black Racism and Discrimination in Ontario's Public Education System" reinforces these concerns. Although the research focuses on public education, it emphasizes how systematic anti-black racism is still evident in the form of low expectations from educators, discriminatory discipline, and ongoing streaming practices. Due in large part to early academic constraints and a lack of institutional support, these findings both reflect and reinforce the hurdles that many racialized students carry into higher education.

Furthermore, these structural dynamics are worsened by the lack of timely, clear, and accessible information. Racialized students are often misinformed about how choosing secondary courses can be a requirement for establishing eligibility for post-secondary pathways. Some students reported that they were surprised in their final year of high school that they could not apply to university because they were in the Applied program and thus did not have the prerequisites needed to pursue their desired program.⁵⁷ As mentioned earlier, although de-streaming has been implemented, students still face pressure from their instructors to pursue specific academic tracks. Without adequate direction and information, racialized students may unintentionally restrict their own post-secondary opportunities. For racialized students who are also first-generation students, this issue is particularly significant because they often have limited familial guidance when applying to post-secondary programs. First-generation students have a 25 percent access rate compared to non-first-generation students who have an access rate between 40 percent to 69 percent.⁵⁸ Although this is rooted from parental attainment of higher education, it represents a broader issue. These students confront major barriers to obtaining higher education if there is no household member who has experience with the course selection process, application process, and/or opportunities in relation to financial assistance.

When selecting their respective post-secondary program and institution, racialized students may decide not to follow their desired post-secondary path due to a lack of representation among post-secondary students alongside the reinforced perceptions related to their ethnicity, race, and culture. In a study conducted on Black students in Canadian institutions, it was discovered that participants often questioned

⁵³ Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Dreams Delayed: Addressing Systemic Anti-Black Racism and Discrimination in Ontario's Public Education System* (Toronto: Ontario Human Rights Commission), 2023. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/dreams-delayed-addressing-systemic-anti-black-racism-and-discrimination-ontarios-public-education>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Sachin Maharaj and Sana Zareey, "The Other Side of the Tracks: How Academic Streaming Impacts Student Relationships," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 30, no. 18 (August 9, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.6905>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Carl E. James and Tana Turner, "Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area (Toronto: York University), 2017. <https://edu.yorku.ca/files/2017/04/Towards-Race-Equity-in-Education-April-2017.pdf>

⁵⁸ Angelo Vaccaro, "An Analysis of Access Barriers to Post-Secondary Education," *College Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2012), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ998777.pdf>

their sense of belonging since they were underrepresented among instructors and peers.⁵⁹ Although these findings focused specifically on Black students, it demonstrates how environments that lack visible diversity and cultural responsiveness can also discourage students from marginalized communities. Racialized students may anticipate entering environments where they feel alone or misunderstood as they navigate the application and transition process. Messages about belonging may be indirectly implied when institutions fail to reflect the diversity of their staff, faculty, and program offerings. Racialized students may have fewer options for their academic and professional pathways if they are deterred from enrolling in courses or institutions where their identities and experiences are not acknowledged or represented. Institutional decisions surrounding programs can further limit opportunities. Racialized students are disproportionately affected by cuts to specific academic programs and research funding for social science and humanities-related disciplines because these cuts restrict their access to programs that often align with their educational and career aspirations. According to Statistics Canada, in the 2020/2021 year, the total visible minority enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs was 21 150 in comparison to the 78 610 of total visible minorities enrolled in Business, Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and Education (BHASE).⁶⁰ Students who are interested in areas such as justice, reconciliation and humanity often resonate within these studies. The elimination of such programs not only removes academic pathways that many racialized students seek, but also limits the intellectual spaces that can validate their lived experiences. Furthermore, transition programs are hindered by limited research, evaluation, and funding which leads to minimal awareness among racialized students, alongside weak connections with schools and community networks. These programs are crucial for facilitating the academic and cultural transition, providing mentorship, and building familiarity with the post-secondary system. Institutions lose a substantial tool for promoting access and retention when these programs are underfunded or nonexistent. These initiatives are helpful, but without community collaboration, fall short of reaching students who need them the most.

Financial inequality is another systemic factor that racialized students often encounter. The financial realities of racialized students pursuing higher education are heavily influenced by the long-standing effects of income inequality and discrimination in the labour market.⁶¹ Racialized women earned 59 cents and racialized men earned 78 cents for every dollar earned by non-racialized men.⁶² However, when comparing racialized women to non-racialized women, this gap narrows with racialized women earning 87 cents for every dollar earned by non-racialized women.⁶³ Many students must deal with financial assistance programs that are not built to take these multifaceted disadvantages into consideration. Financial strain is another reason as to why some students may delay, accumulate excessive debt, or dismiss post-secondary education. This financial marginalization is an example of larger exclusionary tendencies that harm racialized students limiting their access to higher education.

In order to remove these structural barriers, the provincial government should pursue a comprehensive and equity-informed strategy. An advisory committee consisting of diverse racialized students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community leaders should be implemented to consult on the representation of racialized students and the educational outcomes at the post-secondary level. It is imperative that this advisory committee have significant influence in order to ensure that lived experiences drive the sector's

⁵⁹ Carl E. James and Leanne Taylor, "Negotiating University, Fulfilling the Dream: The Case of Black Students in Canadian Universities," *Genealogy* 8, no. 3 (2024): 115. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8030115>

⁶⁰ Statistics Canada, Canadian Career, Technical or Professional Training Diploma Students Belonging to a Visible Minority Group, by Field of Study. 2023. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb1/en/tv.action?pid=3710024701>

⁶¹ Sheila Block, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Ricardo Tranjan, *Canada's Colour Coded Income Inequality* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives), 2019. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Canada%27s%20Colour%20Coded%20Income%20Inequality.pdf>

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

access, support, and retention plans. In addition, a special purpose grant should be implemented to help universities continue to provide courses and programs that facilitate academic research and discussion surrounding topics like justice, reconciliation, and humanity in order to promote diversity and inclusion within programs. This would allow disciplines such as the social sciences and humanities specifically, to provide racialized students with the intellectual and cultural spaces needed to thrive. The provincial government should amend Section 20 (8) to require the institutional gathering and release of disaggregated race-based data every three years. Further, the collection and publication of this data would be of aid in identifying disparities and tracking progress. Students are more likely to pursue higher education in their desired program when they feel educated, protected, and represented. By ensuring that the post-secondary experience can be achieved free from the disproportionate harms of systemic racism and discrimination, a more prosperous and equitable system can be achieved.

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

This policy paper builds upon the detailed work of Indigenous students in OUSA's Indigenous Studies (IS) policy paper, which provides valuable insights into the proposed policy concern recommendations (PCRs). For a deeper understanding of how these recommendations would be implemented in practice, readers are encouraged to refer to the OUSA IS paper, which offers a more comprehensive exploration of the strategies and outcomes associated with these initiatives.⁶⁴

Principle: Post-secondary institutions should be encouraged to foster diverse and inclusive communities that reflect the identities of Indigenous students.

Principle: Students should have access to course content, supports and resources in their preferred Indigenous language.

Principle: Indigenous students should have equitable access to post-secondary education, regardless of their previous educational pathway, with tailored supports upon entrance.

Principle: Indigenous students should have equitable access to post-secondary education and experiences free from systematic oppression, colonization, and discrimination.

Principle: Post-secondary institutions must deliver Indigenous-specific educational and support programs.

Concern: Institutional and systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples affect educational outcomes and career preparedness, limiting opportunities, readiness, social wellbeing, and confidence for post-secondary education.

Concern: Many non-Indigenous educational staff, administrators, and counsellors lack the necessary cultural understanding to effectively support Indigenous students, resulting in potential biases and barriers to academic and personal success.

Concern: Limited Indigenous language services, coupled with inadequate mental health supports and cultural practices for Indigenous students, create systemic barriers that limit full engagement and perpetuate inequities in post-secondary education.

Concern: Preconceived notions about Indigenous Peoples in the educational institution of their choice may pressure Indigenous students into post-secondary pathways that do not align with their preferences or goals.

⁶⁴ You can find OUSA's Indigenous Students Policy paper here: https://www.ousa.ca/policy_indigenous_students

Concern: A lack of Indigenous representation in education, coupled with colonial academic curricula, discourages Indigenous students from pursuing post-secondary education.

Concern: Universities lack programs to bridge the educational gaps that may be experienced by Indigenous students on First Nation reserves due to a lack of resources or support.

Concern: Many Indigenous-specific post-secondary education programs (e.g., Indigenous Studies, Indigenous Education) remain inaccessible for Indigenous students due to culturally unsafe environments, often instigated by non-Indigenous faculty & peers

Concern: Indigenous faculty face lower promotion and tenure rates, resulting in reduced retention and higher turnover, which directly impacts students' access to consistent mentorship and culturally relevant education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should implement mandatory, recurring, and culturally relevant, anti-Indigenous racism and cultural sensitivity training for non-Indigenous educators, administrators, and counsellors.

Recommendation: The provincial government should increase and provide long term funding to support increased Indigenous representation in leadership and staff roles at post-secondary institutions.

Recommendation: The provincial government should mandate post-secondary institutions to ensure a continued high-education by replacing vacant and retiring Indigenous education positions with equally qualified successors. ,

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should collaborate with the federal government to implement the TRC Calls to Action by using the proposed government strategies, specifically focusing on Calls 14 and 15, to increase the accessibility of post-secondary education resources in Indigenous languages.

Recommendation: The provincial government should invest in Indigenous centered post-secondary education outreach programs during secondary education, both on- and off-reserve, to increase students' ability to attend their preferred post-secondary education pathway.

Recommendation: The provincial government should fund post-secondary bridging programs that are developed by Indigenous communities and educators that incorporate cultural and academic transition supports.

Recommendation: The provincial government and post-secondary institutions should collaborate with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to provide a culturally inclusive environment for hiring, retaining and ensuring the succession of Indigenous staff, enhancing classroom representation and developing decolonial pedagogies for Indigenous course content and programs.

Recommendation: The provincial government should develop comprehensive and accessible outreach resources outlining the financial supports available to Indigenous post secondary students in Indigenous languages.

Recommendation: The provincial government should fund and mandate enhanced training for guidance counsellors on pathways to post-secondary education for Indigenous students, through the Ministry of Education.

Indigenous students should have equitable access to post-secondary education and experiences that are free from systemic oppression, colonization, and discrimination. This access must be upheld regardless of their previous educational pathways, with tailored supports provided upon entrance to foster academic success and personal wellbeing. However, many Indigenous-specific post-secondary programs, such as Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education, remain inaccessible due to culturally unsafe environments, often shaped by the attitudes and actions of non-Indigenous faculty and peers.

Additionally, systemic and institutional oppression continues to impact Indigenous learners, limiting their educational outcomes, confidence, and career preparedness.

Many non-Indigenous educators, administrators, and counsellors lack the cultural awareness necessary to effectively support Indigenous students, which can result in unintentional biases and barriers throughout the educational journey. For instance, preconceived notions about Indigenous Peoples within post-secondary institutions can pressure students into academic pathways that do not align with their interests or goals. This issue is compounded by the fact that universities often lack bridging programs to support Indigenous students who may experience educational gaps due to under-resourced schooling on First Nation reserves.⁶⁵ Further compounding these challenges, many guidance counsellors are not equipped with adequate knowledge of the unique needs of Indigenous students, including the availability of remote or community-based programs, financial aid, and culturally grounded support services. As a result, Indigenous students may miss out on opportunities better suited to their goals and contexts.

To address these systemic issues, the provincial government should implement mandatory, recurring, and culturally relevant anti-Indigenous racism and cultural sensitivity training for all non-Indigenous educators, administrators, and counsellors. Through the Ministry of Education, it should also fund and mandate enhanced training for guidance counsellors focused on the full range of post-secondary pathways for Indigenous students, including information on funding, mentorship, and culturally responsive services. Additionally, the provincial government must invest in Indigenous-centered post-secondary outreach programs during secondary education, both on- and off-reserve, to ensure students are informed and empowered to pursue the educational paths that align with their goals. Finally, the province should fund post-secondary bridging programs designed by Indigenous communities and educators that provide both academic and cultural transition supports, helping to close systemic gaps and support successful entry and retention in post-secondary education.

In order to make these institutions more welcoming and supportive, post-secondary institutions must also foster diverse and inclusive academic communities that reflect the identities, experiences, and aspirations of Indigenous students. A continued lack of Indigenous representation in faculty,⁶⁶ combined with colonial academic curricula, discourages Indigenous participation and contributes to feelings of isolation and cultural disconnection. Students have raised further concerns over the disproportionately low promotion and tenure rates for Indigenous faculty members, leading to higher turnover and reduced continuity in support for students.

To counter this, the provincial government should require post-secondary institutions to ensure succession in Indigenous education roles by replacing retiring or vacating staff with equally qualified Indigenous educators. In parallel, both government and institutions should collaborate with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to develop culturally inclusive hiring and retention practices, strengthen succession planning, and incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems into course content and pedagogy. These efforts will support the creation of truly decolonized learning spaces that affirm Indigenous identities and experiences.

⁶⁵ Herkimer, Jaiden. "Holding Our Ground: Indigenous Student Post-Secondary Persistence & Early Leaving". Indspire, 2021. <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Holding-Our-Ground-Report-EN-Final-WEB1.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Greenfield, Emma. "Supporting Indigenous Student Success in Post-Secondary Education: Thriving from Application to Graduation". Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, 2020. <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PDF-Supporting-Indigenous-Student-Success.pdf>

Furthermore, access to culturally relevant education must include access to Indigenous languages. Language is deeply tied to identity,⁶⁷ healing, and knowledge sharing, yet many post-secondary institutions lack Indigenous language services. These gaps perpetuate systemic barriers and inhibit full participation in academic life. To address this, MCURES should work with the federal government to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action,⁶⁸ particularly Calls 14 and 15, by increasing the availability of post-secondary resources and programming in Indigenous languages. Additionally, the provincial government should develop and distribute comprehensive, accessible outreach materials in Indigenous languages that outline available financial supports. These measures are essential for fostering inclusive, empowering educational environments where Indigenous students can thrive academically, culturally, and personally.

STUDENTS WITH LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Principle: Students of lower socioeconomic status should receive a higher proportion of grants to loans than high-income students, when accessing post-secondary education.

Principle: Students of lower socioeconomic status should feel empowered to pursue their preferred post-secondary pathway free from financial or systemic barriers.

Concern: Students of lower socioeconomic status may face significant financial barriers when accessing post-secondary education.

Concern: Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have intersecting identities, wherein they face compounding systemic barriers in accessing and affording post-secondary education.

Concern: Students with reduced financial means may not be able to devote time to studying and pursuing extracurricular activities due to work or familial obligations.

Concern: Students from families of lower socioeconomic status may receive disproportionately low support or assistance from family in accessing and affording post-secondary education.

Concern: Primary and secondary schools in neighbourhoods with greater density of lower socioeconomic families may lack resources needed to support their students and allow them to succeed in a learning environment.

Concern: Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be deterred from accessing post-secondary education due to limited access of grants, rather than loans and a lack of capacity to repay student debt, and eligibility for grants to loans.

Recommendation: The provincial government should invest in targeted enrichment programs which aim to build lifelong learning skills for students with lower socioeconomic status, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should increase funding for outreach groups to provide resources, programs and services for elementary and secondary schools in neighbourhoods with an increased lower socioeconomic population, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education.

⁶⁷ Sterzuk, Andrea, and Richard Fayant. "Towards Reconciliation through Language Planning for Indigenous Languages in Canadian Universities." *Current Issues in Language Planning* 17, no. 3-4 (2016): 332–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2016.1201239>.

⁶⁸ "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action". National Centre for Truth & Reconciliation, 2015. https://new.nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

Access to post-secondary education in Ontario is critical for fostering social mobility and economic growth. However, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face persistent and interconnected challenges when accessing post-secondary education. High tuition fees and indirect costs, such as housing, transportation, and childcare, pose significant financial and systemic barriers. Addressing these challenges requires a robust, equity-focused approach to financial aid, community investment, and systemic reform. For many, these challenges are further compounded by the need to work long hours or manage familial obligations, leaving little time for academic pursuits or participation in extracurricular activities that foster personal growth and career readiness. Without access to sufficient financial aid or clear pathways to grants, the looming prospect of long-term debt often deters students from pursuing higher education altogether.⁶⁹

The financial barriers faced by these students are exacerbated by systemic inequities that intersect with other marginalized identities, such as race, disability, geographic location, etc.⁷⁰ These financial barriers extend beyond tuition fees to include living expenses, transportation, and the opportunity costs associated with full-time study. Schools in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of low-income families are often underfunded, leaving students without the tools and opportunities needed to succeed academically and pursue higher education. These systemic inequities persist into adulthood, as the fear of unmanageable debt and limited eligibility for grants deter many low-income students from applying for post-secondary education altogether. Targeted government investment in enrichment programs and increased funding for schools in underserved areas are critical measures to level the playing field. These initiatives not only promote equitable learning environments but also foster lifelong skills like resilience, critical thinking, and financial literacy, empowering students to navigate the complexities of educational pathways confidently. The financial aid system in Ontario, while intended to alleviate such burdens, often falls short of meeting the needs of low-income students. Means-tested programs like the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) frequently undervalue the unique financial realities faced by these students, including the indirect costs of education. Furthermore, the prioritization of loans over grants imposes an undue financial strain on those already hesitant to incur debt. Reforming OSAP to ensure equitable valuation of students' circumstances and prioritizing grants for low- and middle-income families would significantly enhance access to post-secondary education.

To address these barriers, the provincial government must prioritize equity in its policies and investments. Increasing the proportion of grants to loans for low- and medium-income students is a critical step. By offering financial aid primarily in the form of grants, Ontario can alleviate the burden of debt and encourage higher education participation among low-income populations. For high-income students, a combination of grants and loans is appropriate, ensuring that resources are allocated where they are most needed. Beyond financial aid reform, targeted investments in enrichment programs and community outreach are essential. Providing funding streams to schools in low-income neighborhoods can create high-quality learning environments that prepare students for post-secondary success.⁷¹ Parental and community support disparities further impede the educational aspirations of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Families with limited financial means often lack the resources, knowledge, and experience necessary to navigate the complexities of post-secondary applications, financial aid processes, scholarship opportunities, and career pathway exploration. This gap places an undue burden on students, who may miss critical information and opportunities. Outreach groups and programs must be

⁶⁹ Pathways to Education. 2023. *The Impacts of Socioeconomic Status and Educational Attainment on Youth Success*. <https://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca/the-impacts-of-socioeconomic-status-and-educational-attainment-on-youth-success/>.

⁷⁰ Ford, R., Hui, T.S., Nguyen, C. (2019). *Postsecondary Participation and Household Income*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

⁷¹ Deller, F. & Tamburri, R. (2019). *Early Supports for Accessing Postsecondary Education: Good, Bad or Indifferent?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

empowered to offer resources and services that build lifelong learning skills and promote awareness of post-secondary opportunities. As such, the provincial government should increase funding for outreach groups to provide resources, programs and services for elementary and secondary schools in neighbourhoods with an increased lower socioeconomic population, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education. Such initiatives can play a pivotal role in guiding families and students through the application process, demystifying financial aid, and fostering greater community engagement.

Ensuring that financial aid programs like OSAP are responsive to the unique needs of low-income students, investing in underfunded schools, and bolstering community support structures are essential steps toward leveling the educational playing field. As such, the provincial government should invest in targeted enrichment programs which aim to build lifelong learning skills for students with lower socioeconomic status, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education. Such measures not only benefit individual students but also contribute to the broader socio-economic prosperity of the province.

RURAL & NORTHERN STUDENTS

Principle: Rural and northern students should have the same quality of primary and secondary education, as well as the same ease of access to outreach and support programs.

Principle: Rural, northern and Indigenous communities should be consulted to ensure meaningful dialogue about the unique barriers to access post-secondary education.

Principle: Students should have access to materials, supports and resources in their preferred language.

Principle: Students deserve to feel represented and experience diversity in the communities where they access post-secondary education.

Concern: Students living in rural and northern communities are disproportionately affected by unreliable internet access.

Concern: Rural and northern areas in Ontario experience lower enrollment rates into post-secondary education compared to southern, urban counterparts.

Concern: Geographical challenges and insufficient recruitment and outreach efforts hinder rural and northern students from accessing post-secondary education and related opportunities.

Concern: The model used for calculating Ontario Student Grants does not factor in distance-related travel costs for students in rural or northern areas.

Concern: Lack of adequate support services and resources diminishes a rural and northern student's chances of completing pre-bachelor's education, limiting eligible post-secondary pathways and future career opportunities.

Concern: High relocation costs, familial ties, and policies favoring urban institutions restrict program availability and educational pathways for rural and northern students.

Concern: Many post-secondary institutions in Ontario do not provide adequate support in French and Indigenous languages, which when coupled with inadequate mental health supports, perpetuate systemic inequities to full engagement and access to post-secondary education.

Concern: Students may feel discouraged in accessing post-secondary education in rural and northern communities due to perceived lack of diversity.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should collaborate with rural and northern school boards to create localized awareness campaigns aiming to address gaps in existing post-secondary recruitment and outreach efforts.

Recommendation: The provincial government should re-establish the Geographic Circumstances Grant to expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund to provide targeted financial support and travel subsidies for students to access the Ontario Universities' fair in the nearest region.

Recommendation: The provincial government should actively collaborate with rural and northern community organizations, and local Indigenous governments ensuring adequate consultation on local needs as well as addressing unique barriers for rural and northern students in accessing post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure that students are appropriately prioritized in the federal government's investment in internet access.

Recommendation: The provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel, from their place of permanent residence to their preferred institution offering their program of choice.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide envelope funding to support the provision of support services and courses in French and Indigenous languages.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should provide grant funding to expand student services in French for students accessing rural and northern bilingual post-secondary institutions.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide grant funding to rural and northern community organizations for programming targeting the inclusion of underrepresented groups.

Access to post-secondary education for rural and northern students in Ontario is impeded by a complex interplay of structural, geographic, and socio-economic barriers. Only 15 percent of rural Ontarians aged 15 to 64 held a university degree, compared to 33 percent of their urban counterparts.⁷² The disparities that arise from these factors not only limit educational opportunities but also contribute to persistent gaps in enrollment, retention, and successful completion of post-secondary programs.

One of the most critical and measurable disparities between rural and urban students in Ontario is access to reliable internet infrastructure. While digital connectivity has become a foundational requirement for education, employment, and civic participation, students living in rural and northern communities are disproportionately affected by unreliable internet access. According to data from 2023, 92.9 percent of Ontario households overall have access to high-speed internet (defined as 50/10 Mbps); however, in northern Ontario this figure falls dramatically to 73 percent, and in some of the five largest northern communities, connectivity drops further to just 52 percent.⁷³ The completion rate for broadband projects in northern Ontario lags behind the rest of the province – only 8.9 percent of infrastructure projects have been completed in the north compared to 42 percent in the rest of Ontario.⁷⁴ While the provincial and federal governments have made substantial investments in broadband expansion – with over \$4 billion committed to ensure province-wide high-speed access by the end of 2025, and more than \$2.4 billion already allocated to over 270 projects⁷⁵ – these investments must include a specific prioritization of

⁷² Statistics Canada, "2021 Census of Population: Education Highlight Tables."

⁷³ Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), "Communications Monitoring Report 2023: Broadband Availability," Government of Canada, <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/PolicyMonitoring/2023/cmr.htm>.

⁷⁴ Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "High-Speed Access for All: Canada's Connectivity Strategy - Progress Update 2023," Government of Canada.

⁷⁵ Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure, "Broadband and Cellular Infrastructure Program," Government of Ontario.

students. The provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure that students are appropriately prioritized in the federal government's investment in internet access. This prioritization must reflect the unique learning environments of students, including access to online learning platforms, virtual outreach programs, digital mental health supports, and hybrid course offerings. Without such a focus, broadband policy risks addressing general infrastructure without meeting the critical needs of those most impacted by educational barriers.

Geographical challenges and insufficient recruitment and outreach efforts continue to hinder rural and northern students from accessing post-secondary education and related opportunities. In southern Ontario, students benefit from concentrated institutional outreach, in-person recruitment events, and a variety of public transportation options which rural and northern students are not privy to. The provincial government should re-establish the Geographic Circumstances Grant to expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund to provide targeted financial support and travel subsidies for students to access the Ontario Universities' fair in the nearest region. Additionally, recruitment strategies must be restructured to reflect the unique realities of rural and northern communities. When outreach programs are designed primarily for urban audiences, they overlook the differing cultural contexts, academic preparation, and logistical constraints of rural students. A student living in Kenora, for example, may be unable to afford the cost or time commitment of traveling to a major urban centre like Toronto or Ottawa to attend an information fair or campus visit. This lack of access is not the result of disinterest but of systemic exclusion. The Ministry of Education must collaborate with rural and northern school boards to create localized awareness campaigns aimed at addressing these recruitment gaps. Such campaigns must be tailored to regional realities, incorporating community voices and ensuring that outreach materials are culturally and linguistically accessible.

Financial barriers remain among the most poignant challenges for rural and northern students, especially as they navigate the additional costs associated with long-distance relocation. The model currently used for calculating distance-related components of the Ontario Student Grant is contingent on whether or not there is a post-secondary institution within 80 kilometers of the student's home.⁷⁶ Academic programs are shaped and promoted by universities in ways that make the program unique to them and make it desirable to students all across the province. If the distance-related Ontario Student Grant is only awarded when a student does not have an institution within 80 kilometers of their home, this significantly undermines student choice. To address this inequity, the provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel from their permanent residence to their preferred institution. This grant must go beyond one-time relocation stipends to reflect recurring costs associated with returning home during academic breaks, emergency travel, and the ongoing challenge of maintaining familial and cultural ties.

High relocation costs, familial ties, and policies favoring urban institutions restrict program availability and educational pathways for rural and northern students.

Equitable access to post-secondary education for rural and northern students in Ontario must also address the cultural and linguistic realities that shape students' experiences and engagement. In Ontario, many post-secondary institutions, particularly those serving rural and northern regions, fall short in providing adequate support in French and Indigenous languages, creating additional layers of exclusion. Moreover, mental health services that reflect cultural competency remain critically underfunded in these regions. Indigenous students and Francophone students have unique mental health needs tied to cultural identity, historical trauma, and language that standard institutional supports often fail to address

⁷⁶ Student Financial Assistance Branch, "Ontario Student Assistance Program: Full-Time OSAP Policy Manual 2020-21," Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, Version 2.1, October 2020 (unpublished).

adequately. When this linguistic marginalization is compounded by insufficient mental health resources tailored to diverse cultural needs, it reinforces barriers to full participation and success in post-secondary education.

The province must take decisive action by providing envelope funding to support the delivery of support services and courses in French and Indigenous languages. As the Blue Ribbon Panel describes, the University of Ottawa stands as the largest bilingual post-secondary institution but when looking at the two other French-language universities in Ontario, there are still significant financial shortfalls to address in order to ensure their sustainability.⁷⁷ As such, MCURES should provide grant funding explicitly aimed at expanding student services in French at rural and northern bilingual post-secondary institutions. Without sustained and targeted financial support, Francophone students in northern Ontario face the difficult choice of either uprooting to urban centres or pursuing education in a second language, which may diminish academic success and cultural connection.⁷⁸ In addition, the province's grant funding should extend to rural and northern community organizations that develop programming targeting the inclusion of underrepresented groups. Funding community-led initiatives that promote inclusivity creates the necessary social infrastructure for students to feel seen and supported, which directly correlates with higher enrollment and completion rates.⁷⁹ Indigenous students in these regions encounter analogous challenges. Indigenous-led post-secondary education providers, such as the Anishinabek Educational Institute, play a critical role in delivering culturally relevant curricula grounded in Indigenous worldviews. However, these institutions require expanded funding to broaden access and incorporate Indigenous languages fully within their programming.⁸⁰ Also, engagement is critical as Indigenous Institutes recognized under the *Indigenous Institutes Act* of 2017 embody the sovereignty and cultural priorities of Indigenous learners and communities. Integrating their perspectives into provincial post-secondary planning not only honors treaty relationships but also aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action regarding Indigenous education.⁸¹ The provincial government must actively collaborate with local Indigenous governments and community organizations to ensure that policy and programming are responsive to distinct cultural contexts and barriers.

USE OF STRATEGIC MANDATE AGREEMENTS

Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) were introduced by the provincial government in 2014 with the intention of increasing the transparency and accountability of how post-secondary institutions utilize the funding they receive. The first iteration of SMAs were in place between 2014-17 and the second from 2017-20. These first two phases allocated institutional operational funding mostly based on enrollment. In 2019, the Ontario government announced that they intended to base 60 percent of higher education funding from SMAs on ten performance-based funding metrics by 2025.⁸²

These metrics include:

⁷⁷ Alan Harrison and Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, "Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector," Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, 2021, <https://files.ontario.ca/mcu-ensuring-financial-sustainability-for-ontarios-postsecondary-sector-en-2023-11-14.pdf>

⁷⁸ Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES), *Annual Report on French Language Postsecondary Education* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2022), 15-16; Collège Boréal, "About Us," accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.collegeboreal.ca/en/about-us/>.

⁷⁹ Ontario Trillium Foundation, *Community Inclusion and Equity Funding Outcomes* (Toronto: OTF, 2023), 5-7.

⁸⁰ Indigenous Institutes Consortium, *Indigenous Institutes Act Implementation Report* (Toronto: Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, 2023), 22-25.

⁸¹ Government of Ontario, *Indigenous Institutes Act, 2017*, S.O. 2017, c. 34; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action* (Winnipeg: TRC, 2015), 8-9.

⁸² Canadian Association of University Teachers, *Performance-Based Funding in Higher Education*. Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2017. https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/caut-education-review-performance-based_funding_in_higher_education.pdf.

1. Graduate employment earnings
2. Experiential learning
3. Skills and competencies
4. Graduate employment rate in a related field
5. Institutional strength/focus
6. Graduation rate
7. Research funding and capacity
8. Research funding from industry sources
9. Community/local impact of student population
10. Economic impact⁸³

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government chose to delay the activation of this performance based funding until 2023. However in Year 4 (2023-2024), this funding was activated at the system-wide proportion of 10 percent, followed by 25 percent in Year 5 (2024-25).⁸⁴ Now that the negotiations are underway for the newest cycle, OUSA hopes that MCURES takes both student voices, and the recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Panel Report, into account, and lowers the overall reliance on performance-based funding metrics.

Principle: Funding criteria for post-secondary programs should ensure and incentivize equitable and consistent funding for all students and programs.

Principle: Performance-based funding should serve as an incentive for post-secondary institutions to actively enhance access for underrepresented student groups.

Principle: Performance-based funding metrics must fully account for the unique challenges and barriers that marginalized student populations may face in accessing and completing post-secondary.

Concern: Current Strategic Mandate Agreements fail to prioritize access or support for marginalized and underrepresented student groups in institutional enrolment strategies and differentiation strategies.

Concern: Current Strategic Mandate Agreements incentivize institutions to focus on metrics that may disadvantage underrepresented groups, which exacerbates and intensifies existing barriers.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should expand upon the Enrolment Strategy section of the next iteration of Strategic Mandate Agreements with a focus on increasing and incentivizing equitable access.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should add a metric to performance-based funding based on the volume and breadth of student support programs specifically aimed at supporting students from underrepresented groups.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should strategically distribute funds to institutions which set and meet ambitious and meaningful student access targets through their Strategic Mandate Agreements.

Recommendation: The provincial government should revise the weighting of the metrics in Strategic Mandate Agreements to ensure they do not disadvantage students from marginalized groups, including placing less emphasis on graduate earnings and employment.

⁸³ Government of Ontario. "All College and University Strategic Mandate Agreements." Ontario.ca. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/all-college-and-university-strategic-mandate-agreements>.

⁸⁴ Government of Ontario. "All College and University Strategic Mandate Agreements." Ontario.ca. Accessed July 23, 2025. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/all-college-and-university-strategic-mandate-agreements>.

The criteria which determines funding for post-secondary programs should ensure and incentivize equitable and consistent funding for all students, and performance-based funding should serve as an incentive for post-secondary institutions to actively enhance access for underrepresented student groups. Yet, such a stark increase in performance-based funding has serious implications for equitable access to post-secondary education. Studies out of the United States have demonstrated that this model encourages institutions to be more selective in their admissions, incentivizing them to prioritize potential graduation rates in order to achieve their targets. This primarily limits access to post-secondary education for students from low-income backgrounds, who may be seen by institutions as less likely to graduate.⁸⁵ With access to post-secondary already strained for students from marginalized backgrounds, this worsens existing barriers in a system that is designed to continuously exclude them, and will only stifle opportunities for social and economic mobility.

The metrics proposed related to job market outcomes are a cause for concern in the case of equity-deserving students, as students from these groups face systemic oppression in employment.⁸⁶ Research from the United States has indicated that the challenges experienced by equity-deserving groups post graduation has influenced institutions, who operate on performance-based funding, to be more selective in who they admit, focusing on those who are more likely to graduate “on time,” and this has worsened funding disparities between institutions.⁸⁷ According to a report from the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, individuals from equity-deserving groups can face discrimination in hiring practices, and can also earn less than their colleagues in similar positions as a result of the prejudice present in Canadian society.⁸⁸ Essentially, this system skews rewards towards institutions that enroll students with the most social capital and the best chances of being employed at the highest pay immediately after graduating, at the expense of prospective students from Canada’s most marginalized groups.⁸⁹

Therefore, the needs of individuals from equity-deserving groups need to be taken into consideration so that metrics like graduate earnings and the proportion of graduates employed in full-time positions related to their degrees do not pose a bias against individuals from equity-deserving groups. In addition, students from equity-deserving groups have lower graduation rates compared to the student body as a result of systemic oppression in the education system according to data from HEQCO and Statistics Canada.⁹⁰ By revising the weighting of these metrics and placing less emphasis on graduate earnings and employment, the government would be able to ensure that SMAs do not disadvantage students from marginalized groups.

Access to post-secondary for equity-deserving groups continues to be limited, it is important that students from these groups are equitably supported to enter, remain, and graduate from post-secondary education. Despite general enrolment growth in Ontario, there has not been any indication that students

⁸⁵ Ortagus, J. C., Robert Kelchen, Krista Rosinger, and Nicholas Voorhees. “Performance-Based Funding in American Higher Education: A Systematic Synthesis of the Intended and Unintended Consequences.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 42, no. 4 (2020): 520-550. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720953128>. (Original work published 2020).

⁸⁶ Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. *Barriers to Employment and Training for Equity-Seeking Groups: Final Report*. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, May 2021. <https://www.srdc.org/project/barriers-to-employment-and-training-for-equity-seeking-groups-final-report/>.

⁸⁷ Ortagus, J. C., Robert Kelchen, Krista Rosinger, and Nicholas Voorhees. “Performance-Based Funding in American Higher Education: A Systematic Synthesis of the Intended and Unintended Consequences.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 42, no. 4 (2020): 520-550. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720953128>. (Original work published 2020).

⁸⁸ Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. 2021. *Barriers to Employment and Training for Equity-Seeking Groups: Final Report*. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. <https://www.srdc.org/project/barriers-to-employment-and-training-for-equity-seeking-groups-final-report/>.

⁸⁹ Calgary Herald. “Opinion: Time to Press Delete Button on Performance-Based Funding for Universities.” *Calgary Herald*, February 15, 2021. <https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-time-to-press-delete-button-on-performance-based-funding-for-universities>.

⁹⁰ Statistics Canada. “Results from the 2016 Census: Education and Labour Market Integration of Black Youth in Canada.” *Statistics Canada*, February 25, 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2019001/article/00006-eng.htm>.

from equity-deserving groups have also seen tandem increases in enrolment.⁹¹ Performance-based funding metrics must fully account for the unique challenges and barriers facing marginalized student populations, including those related to accessing and completing post-secondary as well as subsequent challenges that arise. SMAs can be a useful tool to track how institutions are using government funding to increase access for students from equity-deserving groups, and makes them more accountable to achieve the goals set out in these agreements. MCURES should expand upon the Enrolment Strategy section of the next iteration of Strategic Mandate Agreements with a focus on increasing and incentivizing equitable access. A briefing note by the C.D. Howe Institute also states that PBF should focus on delivering outcomes that are not already being achieved through other tools, like increasing access to equity-deserving groups.⁹² The province can engage in a number of actions to address this issue that utilize SMAs in a productive and effective way, including consultations with students from these groups to ensure their needs are being met under PBF, as well as measuring the representation and success rates of equity-deserving groups through a performance indicator. This should also include consultations with experts in the sector, including HEQCO and CERIC.

Additionally, by tying institutional funding too heavily to performance outcomes, such as job placement rates or research outputs, universities are incentivized to prioritize short-term financial gains over the long-term educational and societal value of their programs. This approach could disproportionately affect programs in the humanities, social sciences, and arts which may not show immediate employment outcomes but provide crucial cultural, social, and intellectual contributions to society. Differentiation through Strategic Mandate agreements could be used to encourage Ontario universities to occupy varying positions and niches within the sector, such as research focused or equity and access, and promote high quality teaching across all programs and disciplines offered. Instead of this, current institutional enrolment and differentiation strategies are failing to prioritize access or support for marginalized and underrepresented student groups⁹³ and are actively incentivizing institutions to focus on metrics that may disadvantage already underrepresented groups, which exacerbates and intensifies the existing barriers.

Some performance-based funding systems in the United States utilize metrics surrounding student retention, with emerging metrics centered around enrolling and graduating low-income and marginalized students. By encouraging universities to meet these metrics, this system would be able to counteract the otherwise detrimental impacts of our current performance-based funding that work to worsen existing barriers for marginalized students (source). These systems allow SMA's to be a useful tool to track how institutions are using government funding to increase access for students from equity-deserving groups, and makes them more accountable to achieve the goals set out in these agreements.

MCURES is then missing out on an opportunity to provide financial incentives in exchange for the strength of student services and supports. This should be done through the addition of metrics to performance-based funding based on the volume and breadth of student support programs, specifically those aimed at supporting students from underrepresented groups. These would serve to motivate institutions to enhance the existing volume and breadth of student support programs, along with a

⁹¹ Chatoor, Ken, and Ryan Tishcoff. Examining the Role of Sociodemographic Characteristics in Postsecondary Non-Completion and Labour Market Outcomes. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2024. <https://heqco.ca/pub/examining-the-role-of-sociodemographic-characteristics-in-postsecondary-non-completion-and-labour-market-outcomes/>.

⁹² Spooner, Marc. "The Ugly Side of Performance-Based Funding for Universities." Academic Matters, February 13, 2020. <https://academicmatters.ca/the-ugly-side-of-performance-based-funding-for-universities-2/>.

⁹³ Hicks, Martin, and Linda Jonker. *The Differentiation of the Ontario University System: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2016. <https://heqco.ca/pub/the-differentiation-of-the-ontario-university-system-where-are-we-now-and-where-should-we-go/>; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Ontario's Differentiation Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education. Toronto: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2013. https://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/publications/PolicyFramework_PostSec.pdf.

consideration of student satisfaction in these services. These metrics should further draw greater attention to work-integrated learning opportunities, which have been repeatedly proven to be one the strongest contributors to positive student outcomes, including future employment outcomes, as well as higher test scores and graduation rates.⁹⁴ Additionally, the Ministry should create a dedicated student access stream of operating grants under the differentiation envelope to strategically distribute funds to institutions which set and meet ambitious and meaningful student access targets through their Strategic Mandate Agreements.

Currently, there is no requirement for a section that focuses on financial affordability metrics. However, the University of Guelph, in its 2017-2020 Strategic Mandate Agreement, introduced its own subsection that dealt with affordability initiatives under the general initiatives section.⁹⁵ As affordability has been identified by OUSA as a barrier to access, the Ontario government should standardize this form of subsection throughout all SMAs. Furthermore, the government should take action to create standardized metrics about financial affordability, including scholarship availability.

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO UNIVERSITY

FOUNDATIONAL PRE-DEGREE PROGRAMS

Principle: Existing pre-degree programs should be accessible and organized in a central manner, for students to consider when accessing post-secondary education.

Principle: Pre-degree programs improve student outcomes, by increasing their ability to qualify for post-secondary education.

Concern: Potential students may lack awareness regarding the existence of pre-degree/foundational programs to help them qualify for post-secondary pathways.

Concern: Secondary school level educators may lack awareness and adequate information regarding the existence of pre-degree programs to guide students unable to qualify to post-secondary.

Concern: There is a lack of information and research into the effectiveness, success, and quality of these programs due to minimal government oversight/regulations enforcing standards and expectations to be met by these programs, allowing for a lack of institutional accountability.

Concern: A lack of inadequate information makes existing pre-degree programs inaccessible.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should work in collaboration with the Ontario College Application Service to conduct up to date research and data collection on the success of pre-degree programs and the outcomes of students completing such programs.

⁹⁴ Usmani, Saad. "Work-Integrated Learning: Spotlighting an Essential Policy Tool." Toronto Region Board of Trade, July 5, 2024. <https://bot.com/News/Work-Integrated-Learning-Spotlighting-an-Essential-Policy-Tool>.; LaCroix, Emerson. "Meso-Foundations of Experiential Education in Ontario Universities: A Content Analysis of the Province's Strategic Mandate Agreements." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 54, no. 1 (2024): 14–26. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe/article/view/190053>.

⁹⁵ Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. 2017–2020 Strategic Mandate Agreement: University of Guelph. Toronto: Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, 2017. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2017-20-strategic-mandate-agreement-university-guelph#section-5>.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, in collaboration with institutions currently offering foundational programs, should mandate minimum standards and expectations that pre-degree programs should achieve.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should increase public awareness on the availability of pre-degree programs as an alternate pathway to post-secondary education, in a centralized and accessible manner, helping future students and secondary school educators to remain informed of all their educational options.

Pre-Degree, also known as pre-university programs, are considered by the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS) as programs offered by higher education institutions requiring an existing secondary school diploma with an grade 12 English credit, such as the OSSD, and typically award a diploma or certificate when students graduate.⁹⁶ Additional English and math credits may be required, depending on the program.⁹⁷ For pre-university programs that are graduate certificate programs, a completion of a degree or diploma program is required. The purpose of pre-degree programs is to fulfill the growing global need for additional support to close the existing achievement gap, to ensure students can succeed in post-secondary programs.⁹⁸ The impact of the covid-19 and consequent school closures has had long-lasting impacts on the education sector by inhibiting student opportunities at essential developmental ages (e.g. high school students and community volunteering or professional development) and limiting social interactions, creating a gap in interpersonal skill development.⁹⁹ The HEQCO has recently published findings addressing how these alternate pathways, termed ‘academic upgrading’ or ‘preparatory programs’ by the organization, is offered in some capacity by 24 publicly funded colleges.¹⁰⁰ Some universities also offer preparatory programs in some capacity such as Ontario Tech University’s ‘University Preparatory Program’, a requirement for conditional offers of their non-competitive programs.¹⁰¹ While these programs were typically seen as bridging programs for international students, they are also key in providing domestic students with necessary guidance, support, and provision of the knowledge and skills to confidently transition to university or other preferred post-secondary pathways, bridging an existing gap for outgoing high school seniors.¹⁰² Therefore, foundational pre-degree, also commonly termed as ‘preliminary’ or ‘preparatory’, programs aim to help students fill the gaps that they face to qualify for post-secondary education.

In Ontario, various post-secondary institutions offer pre-degree programs or courses for high school students, aiming to prepare students in one of three primary ways, University Exploration Programs, University Preparation Programs and Bridging Programs. The first includes a range of disciplines that include philosophy, psychology, sociology, and English to allow students to discover their interests. They teach foundational knowledge and skills and provide credits which can potentially be transferred to university programs. The second type is most common in science disciplines and aims to provide

⁹⁶ OES High School. “What Is Pre-University in Canada? How Does It Work?” *OES High School*. Accessed July 29, 2025.

⁹⁷ Ontario Colleges. “Pre-Degree / University.” Ontario Colleges. Accessed July 29, 2025.

<https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/programs/career-and-preparation/pre-degree-university>

⁹⁸ OES High School. “What Is Pre-University in Canada? How Does It Work?” *OES High School*. Accessed July 29, 2025.

⁹⁹ Wong, Jessica. “Pandemic Learning Left Students Feeling Behind. Post-Secondary Transition Courses Aim to Get Them on Track.” CBC News. November 15, 2022. Accessed July 29, 2025. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/postsecondary-transition-classes-1.6640691>; Segura, Arturo. “Why Are Pre-University Programs Great for Shortening the Gaps Students Are Graduating With?” *Higher Education Digest*, April 5, 2024. Accessed July 29, 2025. <https://www.highereducationdigest.com/why-are-pre-university-programs-great-for-shortening-the-gaps-students-are-graduating-with/>

¹⁰⁰ Gorman, Glen, Thanh-Thanh Tieu, and Taylor Cook. *Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Students in College Preparatory Programs*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013. Accessed July 29, 2025. http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/Conestoga_ENG.pdf.

¹⁰¹ University Preparatory Program. University Preparation. Continuous Learning. Ontario Tech University. Accessed July 30, 2025. <https://ontariotechu.ca/programs/continuous-learning/university-preparation/upp-2023/index.php>.

¹⁰² Segura, Arturo. “Why Are Pre-University Programs Great for Shortening the Gaps Students Are Graduating With?” *Higher Education Digest*, April 5, 2024. Accessed July 30, 2025. <https://www.highereducationdigest.com/why-are-pre-university-programs-great-for-shortening-the-gaps-students-are-graduating-with/>.

students with the foundational knowledge needed to succeed in university. The last type is common in the nursing industry and helps registered practical nurses advance their career or allows international nurses to get certified to work in Ontario.¹⁰³

Currently, there is no information about pre-degree programs that is readily available for high school graduates, high school educational staff and other students who would benefit from such programs. For instance, in the current Career Studies Curriculum, pre-degree programs and opportunities are not identified as a post-secondary option to consider when exploring their potential future paths and reflecting on their own skills, interests and values.¹⁰⁴ This lack of identification in the curriculum, which serves to be a primary course to connect educators and students with career planning resources, represents the larger issue of a lack of awareness and advertising of pre-degree programs, limiting their ability to bridge the growing gap(s) faced by students seeking a post-secondary education. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should increase public awareness on the availability of pre-degree programs as an alternate pathway to post-secondary education, in a centralized and accessible manner, helping future students and secondary school educators to remain informed of all their educational options.

Alongside a lack of advertising, there is currently a lack of information collected on the effectiveness and quality of such programs, readily available for individuals. The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should work in collaboration with OCAS to conduct up to date research and data collection on the success of foundational pre-degree programs and the outcomes of students completing such programs. This is critical to assess whether the purpose of these programs are being met effectively and if they are evolving for the changing needs of students. The Ministry should also initiate the research and evaluation of the quality of these programs via either the HEQCO or the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) to ensure that students and their educational rights are protected. To further protect students, MCURES, in collaboration with institutions currently offering foundational programs, should mandate minimum standards and expectations that pre-degree programs should achieve. The MCURES should enforce standards via changes to the Ontario Qualifications Framework¹⁰⁵ and Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act,¹⁰⁶ to include foundational pre-degree programs to ensure Universities offering such programs, are held accountable to ensure students attain predetermined educational outcomes. Furthermore, by creating a framework in consultation with existing foundation pre-degree programs, the ministry should create program standards that are accessible, similar existing frameworks and college program standards that are in a searchable online directory.¹⁰⁷ Standards should include, baseline academic expectations and professional competencies, program requirements, and accountability measures which would also allow students to determine if a program is right for them based on the completion requirements. Furthermore program standard documents would allow students to understand the purpose, know what vocational standards and employability skills they will gain in addition to the general education requirements that the institutions

¹⁰³ Pre-Degree / University. [ontariocolleges.ca](https://www.ontariocolleges.ca). Ontario Colleges. Accessed July 30, 2025.

<https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/programs/career-and-preparation/pre-degree-university>.

¹⁰⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education. 2019. The Ontario Curriculum, Career Studies, Grades 10, Open (GLC20): Guidance and Career Education. Advance release. PDF. Accessed July 30, 2025. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/career-studies-grade10.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Ontario Qualifications Framework. Ontario.ca. Government of Ontario. Accessed July 30, 2025. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-qualifications-framework>.

¹⁰⁶ *Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000*. S.O. 2000, c. 36, Schedule. Accessed July 30, 2025. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/00p36>.

¹⁰⁷ College Program Standards. Ontario.ca. Government of Ontario. Last modified July 10, 2025. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/college-program-standards>.

will have to ensure students achieve, helping students understand what completion of a foundational program entails (e.g. pre-health pathway).¹⁰⁸

MATURE STUDENTS

Principle: Mature students should receive support in their efforts to continue their education and lifelong learning. As many are also parents, guardians, or caregivers, their responsibilities should not create additional barriers to accessing education.

Principle: Mature students should not be forced into part-time student status unwillingly in order to financially or otherwise support and provide for themselves and/or dependent(s).

Principle: There should be a clear and consistent definition of mature student used by OSAP and the Ministry of University and Colleges to maintain clear and consistent funding guidelines and for clarity in future research.

Principle: Mature students often bear intersectional identities with additional or compounding barriers that should be considered by supports offered by the provincial government and post-secondary institutions when collecting data and implementing initiatives.

Concern: There is a lack of review and updates on the effectiveness of supports offered to Mature students.

Concern: Mature students often have obligations outside of post-secondary education such as caring for dependents and job commitments, that can limit, lengthen, or make post-secondary education inaccessible due to a lack of support for caregivers.

Concern: Mature students in part-time studies who continue working and/or caring for dependents often do not qualify for particular grants and/or loans due to their income thresholds.

Concern: Many students may not have the financial support or qualify for existing supports to return/continue or change their educational background.

Concern: OSAP's definition of mature students, currently termed as 'Independent students', was changed from out of school for four years to six, making many students unable to access certain, and often necessary, financial aid support.

Concern: Mature students often face challenges such as limited flexibility, unsuitable courses, a lack of relevant co-curricular activities, and insufficient support from knowledgeable advisors, which contribute to lower retention rates.

Concern: Current materials utilized by institutions to support mature students are inadequate in addressing the current pressing needs and challenges of mature students.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should increase current OSAP funding by creating grants for students with dependents to subsidize the cost of care, to supplement the Federal Bursary for Students with Dependents.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should amend OSAP to reduce the percentage of courses needed to be considered full-time for mature students to 40 percent of a full course load.

¹⁰⁸ Pre-Health Sciences Pathway to Certificates and Diplomas Program Standard. Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES). July 2016, updated March 31, 2022. <https://files.ontario.ca/mcu-pre-health-certif-diplomas-2016-41598-en-2022-03-31.pdf>.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Government and Consumer Services should incentivize businesses, through a tax break, to assist mature student employees in continuing their education.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should redefine independent students within OSAP to match both federal student aid guidelines and language commonly used by postsecondary institutions.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should conduct recent research and create materials and training for post-secondary institutions to better support the needs of mature students.

Mature students face a multitude of intersectional factors which influence their ability to access post-secondary education. With a growing trend of job loss and job change identified in both Ontario and across the globe, there is an increase of students who identify as mature, returning to or entering postsecondary education.¹⁰⁹ As mature students engage in higher education and participate in lifelong learning, it is imperative that institutions, the government and other stakeholders collaborate to create feasible higher educational programs, considering the interplaying motivators and barriers faced by mature students. These programs must support and allow mature students to feel confident in their lifelong learning goals and degree completion.

A predominant concern faced by many mature students, as identified in OUSA's 2022 *Mature Students* policy paper, is caregiver responsibilities. As addressed in this paper, a lack of options, affordability and accessibility, can prevent a mature student from accessing a care provider for their dependent, consequently preventing them from being able to access higher education. Furthermore this policy paper and others identify how mature students are more likely to study on a part time basis due to employment demands.¹¹⁰ The MCURES should increase current OSAP funding by creating grants for students with dependents to subsidize the cost of care, to supplement the Federal Bursary for Students with Dependents. Doing so will allow students to reduce the number of hours they may need to work to afford dependent care allowing them to become part time, or provide them with the money itself.

Mature students who must chose to do part-time studies in order to continue working and/or caring for dependents, often do not qualify for particular grants and/or loans. For instance, as identified in the 2022 OUSA policy paper on *Mature Students*, part-time students do not qualify for OSAP's Living Allowance, or are limited in their amount of funding they can access compared to full time students.¹¹¹ This restricts mature students to part-time studies to be able to afford to attend their post-secondary career, as they remain unable to receive adequate funding from the institutions and government alike. The unaffordability of higher education is an issue that is amplified in mature students as many lack fiscal support(s) and are financially independent, unable to qualify for existing support(s) to return to school.¹¹² The provincial government should amend OSAP to reduce the percentage of courses needed to be considered full-time for mature students to 40 percent of a full course load to account for the lack of financial support available for this student population. Furthermore, to incentivize businesses to assist employees in continuing their education, the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services should offer businesses a tax break and

¹⁰⁹ Pichette, Jackie, Rosanna Tamburri, Jess McKeown, Kaitlyn A. W. Blair, and Emily MacKay. Lifelong Learning in Ontario: Improved Options for Mid-career, Underserved Learners. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2019. https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Formatted_Lifelong-Learning-in-Ontario.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Fritz, Victoria, and Tricia van Rhijn. "Examining the Postsecondary Enrolment of Low-Income Mature Students in Canada." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education* 10, no. 2 (2019): 7–20. <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/items/1aaeac19-4ef8-47b3-b9fd-c275003b27f2>.

¹¹¹ Jamalof, Pegah, Niyonella Kamera, Gabriela Morales and Eunice Oladejo, Policy Paper: Mature Students. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022.

¹¹² van Rhijn, Tricia Marie, Donna S. Lero, Katelyn Bridge, and Victoria A. Fritz. "Unmet Needs: Challenges to Success from the Perspectives of Mature University Students." *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 28, no. 1 (2016): 29–47. <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v28i1.4704>.

promote the benefits of employee lifelong learning for the workplace, similar to the Canada-Ontario Job Grant,¹¹³ the Ministry should increase the funding for this grant and Better Jobs Ontario which serves to connect Mature Learners who face(d) unemployment.¹¹⁴

The ‘mature’/‘independent’ student definitions used by OSAP and the Ministry of University and Colleges should remain consistent and reliable, to maintain clear and consistent funding guidelines and for clarity in future research. As highlighted in the *Mature Students* policy paper, there are no standards regarding the ‘mature student’ definition amongst institutions, causing definitions to significantly vary from institution to institution.¹¹⁵ As the provincial and federal governments also do not define “mature students,” the definition of “independent student” is utilized to represent mature students. However, this definition differs at the federal and provincial levels. For example, with OSAP, the federal government’s definition of independent students includes those that have been out of high school for at least 4 years, while the Ontario government only includes those that have been out of high school for at least 6 years. This inconsistency can be extremely confusing for mature students as they apply to various institutions, seek financial assistance, and much more. Furthermore, the change from four years to six, excluded many students from accessing certain, and often necessary, financial aid support.¹¹⁶ The MCURES should redefine mature students within OSAP as those who have been out of school for four years, rather than six, matching the federal ‘independent’ student definition to avoid these barriers at a provincial scale.

It is crucial that institutions and governments understand that mature students are a heterogeneous group, bearing many identities alongside their ‘mature’ status, which poses additional barriers that should be considered by supports offered by the government(s) and post-secondary institutions when collecting data and implementing initiatives. There is a current lack of review and consistent updates to these supports. As highlighted in the *Mature Students* policy paper and in current research,¹¹⁷ mature students report a lack of or inaccessible: sense of belonging and social integration, flexibility,¹¹⁸ suitable courses, relevant co-curricular activities and work-integrated opportunities, and career & academic counsellors/advisors with the necessary skills to guide mature students during their transition to higher education, leading to decreased retention rates in this student population.¹¹⁹ The MCURES should conduct research to create materials and training for Career Services and Academic Supports at Universities to better support the needs of Mature Students on an ongoing basis, as well as to identify and bridge other gaps in an effective manner.

TRANSFER STUDENTS BETWEEN POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Principle: Students should be able to transfer between post-secondary institutions without facing excessive financial costs or academic penalties.

¹¹³ Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. "Canada-Ontario Job Grant (COJG)." Ontario.ca. Last modified July 25, 2025. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/canada-ontario-job-grant-cojg>.

¹¹⁴ George Brown College. "How to Qualify for Better Jobs Ontario." Last modified July 25, 2025.

<https://www.georgebrown.ca/programs/types/better-jobs-ontario/prospective-applicants/how-to-qualify>.

¹¹⁵ Jamalof, Pegah, Niyonella Kamera, Gabriela Morales and Eunice Oladejo, *Policy Paper:*

Mature Students. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Jafar, Hayfa F. "Transition Experiences of Mature Students at Ontario Colleges." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 52, no. 4 (2022): 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v52i4.189729>.

¹¹⁸ van Rhijn, Tricia, Caitlyn Osborne, Deborah Gores, Amiah Keresturi, Ruth Neustifter, Amy Muise, and Victoria Fritz. "'You're a Mature Student and You're a Tiny, Tiny Little Fish in a Big Massive Pond of Students': A Thematic Analysis Investigating the Institutional Support Needs of Partnered Mature Students in Postsecondary Study." *Education Sciences* 13, no. 11 (2023): 1069. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13111069>.

¹¹⁹ Jamalof, Pegah, Niyonella Kamera, Gabriela Morales and Eunice Oladejo, *Policy Paper: Mature Students*, Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022.

Principle: Students should have early, easily accessible and understandable information about transferring between post-secondary institutions.

Principle: Students should be able to transfer between post-secondary institutions with awareness of both potential academic setbacks and benefits.

Concern: Transfer students may lack the financial resources needed to cover costs associated with transferring between post-secondary institutions.

Concern: Transfer students are required to pay the baseline application cost for three programs when applying for transfer programs through the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC), even when applying for only one program.

Concern: Students may be unaware of the process or ability to transfer between post-secondary institutions, and available resources to support them, as the rules for transferring between different institutions are inconsistent and unstandardized.

Concern: Students considering transferring between post-secondary institutions struggle to access relevant information due to lack of informed and targeted outreach and a lack of data collection on student transfers.

Concern: Students from marginalized groups often face additional barriers in transferring between post-secondary institutions, and often do not see some types of post-secondary institutions as a viable option for them.

Concern: Students often face unexpected challenges due to the current consequences of being a transfer student, such as increased degree completion times and lower retention or graduation rates.

Concern: Students are unable to access transfer pathways which can aid students in mitigating the issues, and subsequent consequences, that they may face at their current institution.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should develop a grant, through the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), for lower socioeconomic transfer students to waive their cost of transfer fees.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) allow transfer students to pay a per-program-basis application fee, removing the current baseline cost for students, so students seeking to transfer, are not expected to pay for costs beyond the application fee(s) for the program(s) they aspire to transfer to.

Recommendation: The provincial government should track student transfer programs and release anonymized information to institutions to help better inform university outreach and programming.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should promote the standardization of more basic and general courses offerings to facilitate the accrediting of previously passed courses for incoming transfer students as a step towards standardizing transfer credit processes to achieve a provincial post-secondary transfer credit guide.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should develop a fund and distinct institutional responsibilities, that allows for the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) and post-secondary institutions to allocate resources to increase advertisement of transfer opportunities.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should, in consultation with experts such as ONCAT and advocacy groups, work/collaborate to identify gaps in the transfer credit system and supports needed by transfer students.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should develop outreach programs aimed at building knowledge around university transfer protocols, expectations, and supports, and invest in targeted outreach for said programs to underrepresented groups utilizing data collected from relevant consultations.

Students should be able to transfer between post-secondary institutions without insurmountable financial barriers and be aware of potential academic and financial repercussions. Transfer students may lack the financial resources they need to transfer between post-secondary institutions, as the costs to transfer can vary between institutions. Students may be unaware of the process or ability to transfer between post-secondary institutions, and of the available resources to support them due to a lack of: accessible and understandable information about transferring between post-secondary institutions, targeted outreach and data collection on student transfers. This information should outline the common potential academic setbacks and benefits that are associated with transferring between post-secondary institutions. The OUSA 2020 OUSS found that many transfer students did not use the predominant resources available and hosted by the government. Only a small minority of transfer students (5 percent) reported having used ONTransfer.ca to guide or inform their credit transfer process, which is the centralized, clear and up-to-date information on credit transfer opportunities, policies and processes.¹²⁰ And of those who did use ONTransfer.ca, only 34 percent found it very helpful, 41 percent found it somewhat helpful, and 28 percent did not find it helpful.¹²¹ To better increase educational opportunities for post-secondary students across Ontario, MCURES should develop a fund, and distinct institutional responsibilities, that allows ONCAT and post-secondary institutions to allocate resources to increase advertisement of transfer opportunities, the transfer guide and the associated pathways that can help students with any mitigation of issues they may face.¹²² To better inform transfer guides and programs MCURES should track student transfer programs and release anonymized information to institutions to help better inform university outreach and programming. Furthermore, to address and fix the lack of existing resource efficacy and utilization, such as that of ONTransfer.ca, MCURES should, in consultation with experts such as ONCAT and advocacy groups, work/collaborate to identify gaps in the transfer credit system and supports needed by transfer students.

Students who are willing and qualified to attend post-secondary education should feel able and supported through transitions between post-secondary institutions. However, students from marginalized groups often face additional barriers in transferring between post-secondary institutions, and often do not see university as a viable option for them. Such barriers include: insufficient student-teacher relationships, cultural stereotypes/racism, lack of financial support and essentializing students, as well as a student's personal criteria that considers student interests and preferences.¹²³ The MCURES should develop outreach programs aimed at building knowledge around university protocols, expectations, supports, etc., and invest in targeted outreach for said programs to underrepresented and marginalized groups utilizing data collected from relevant and informed consultations.

Students face unexpected financial and academic challenges due to the current unclear consequences of being a transfer student. From administrative set-backs to loss of credits, the implications can greatly impact one's academic journey and ability to complete their degree of choice.¹²⁴ To help alleviate the

¹²⁰ Andrade-Dixon, Octavia and Abishane Suthakaran, *Affordability: Results from the 2022 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey. Research Report*. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2025.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ontario Colleges. "Credit Transfer between Colleges and Universities in Ontario." [OntarioColleges.ca, https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/apply/transfer-credits-and-advanced-standing](https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/apply/transfer-credits-and-advanced-standing).

¹²³ Emerson LaCroix, Janice Aurini, and Vanessa Iafolla, *Exploring Transfer Student Integration: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study of Ontario Transfer Students* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, May 2024), <https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/documents/projects/research-project-attachments/Integration%20Final.pdf>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

financial burdens associated with being a transfer student, The provincial government should develop a grant, through the ONCAT, for low-income transfer students to waive their cost of transfer fees. Furthermore, to allow students to have freedom in applying to programs they are actually interested in, and to remove the current base application fee, The MCURES should mandate that the Ontario Universities' Application Centre allow transfer students to pay on a per program rate, removing the current baseline cost for students, so students seeking to transfer, are not expected to pay for costs beyond the application fee(s) for the program(s) they aspire to transfer to. Further, to take a step towards standardizing transfer credit processes and achieving a provincial post-secondary transfer credit guide, The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should promote the standardization of more basic and general courses offerings to facilitate the accrediting of previously passed courses for incoming transfer students as a step towards standardizing transfer credit processes to achieve a provincial post-secondary transfer credit guide.

OUTREACH AND AWARENESS

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Principle: Information about outreach programs, such as program outcomes, eligibility, associated costs or fees, and application processes, should be easily accessible and understandable.

Principle: Outreach programs should introduce students to post-secondary education early, exposing them to new opportunities and fostering their development and interest in further education.

Concern: Students who do not have their high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) often have limited awareness of opportunities for post-secondary education.

Concern: There is little research focused on the outcomes and effectiveness of outreach programs.

Concern: Students who may benefit from outreach programs may be unaware of their existence or requirements.

Concern: Outreach programs may not be designed to address the specific needs of students without traditional secondary school credentials, such as academic preparation, flexible entry pathways, financial and cultural support, career guidance, and mental well-being resources.

Recommendation: The provincial government should work with the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security to promote targeted outreach programs aimed at people who do not have their high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) but wish to pursue further education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), with collecting data on long-term outcomes of outreach programs, focusing on effectiveness, graduation rates, retention, and barriers faced by participants, to inform future improvements and policies.

Recommendation: The provincial government should develop an online portal for all outreach programs that provides in-depth, accessible information on the available programs.

Recommendation: The provincial government should develop grant funding for schools to visit post-secondary institutions on field trips.

The limited availability of accessible pathways to post-secondary education for individuals without a high school diploma or GED presents a significant barrier to educational and economic mobility. While outreach programs exist, they often do not address the unique challenges faced by these students, leading to low participation and success rates.¹²⁵ To bridge this gap, the provincial government should work with MCURES to promote targeted outreach programs aimed at people who do not have their high school diploma or GED but wish to pursue further education. By tailoring outreach efforts to the specific needs of non-traditional students, such programs can create equitable opportunities for individuals seeking to advance their education and career prospects.

To ensure these programs are effective, the provincial government should task the HEQCO, with collecting data on long-term outcomes of outreach programs, focusing on effectiveness, graduation rates, retention, and barriers faced by participants, to inform future improvements and policies. This research should evaluate key metrics such as post-secondary enrollment rates, program completion rates, and employment outcomes to assess their impact. A robust data collection framework will not only inform policy decisions but also guide improvements to outreach programs, ensuring they are responsive to the needs of students without traditional secondary school credentials.¹²⁶

Further, improving access to information is critical in increasing awareness and participation in these programs. A centralized online portal should be developed to consolidate information on all available outreach programs, including eligibility requirements, application processes, and deadlines. The portal should provide detailed, user-friendly information on program offerings, eligibility criteria, application deadlines, and required documentation, with a searchable database and multilingual support to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. By streamlining program information and enhancing public awareness, this initiative will help individuals navigate their educational options more effectively and reduce barriers to entry. Lastly, the provincial government should develop grant funding for schools to visit post-secondary institutions on field trips. Students have expressed their fondness of in-person open houses and information sessions, increasing access to these programs will improve awareness of programs and overall increase the number of students who pursue higher education.

INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

Principle: All students regardless of their background should have an equitable opportunity to access post-secondary education.

Principle: Prospective students should have clear, accessible information on diverse educational pathways.

Principle: Outreach efforts must highlight non-traditional and culturally relevant options to post-secondary education.

Concern: Students who have not completed secondary school or who lack post-secondary prerequisites may face significant challenges in accessing post-secondary education:

Concern: Due to lack of targeted funding and evaluation, outreach efforts for underrepresented groups remain inconsistent and ineffective in improving access to post-secondary education.

¹²⁵ Heller, Blake H. "More Awareness of GED as On-Ramp to College Needed (Opinion)." Inside Higher Ed, December 16, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/12/16/more-awareness-ged-ramp-college-needed-opinion>.

¹²⁶ Chatoor, K., Courts, R., Han, J., Barclay, V., & Colyar, J. (2022) Access Programs in Ontario: OPAIP and Pathways to Education. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

Concern: Current outreach efforts do not adequately support informed decision making for secondary students who wish to access post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should develop a grant for universities to create and enhance existing outreach programs that provide opportunities to meet post-secondary requirements.

Recommendation: The Ministry of College and Universities should renew funding to account for inflation each year for the Ontario Post-Secondary Access and Inclusion Program (OPAIP) to allow post-secondary institutions to continue to use it to deliver enhanced outreach programs for students.

Recommendation: The provincial government should task Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), in publishing best practice guidelines for post-secondary institutions' outreach initiatives, ensuring those initiatives support students and applicants' informed decision making on post-secondary pathways.

Targeted, inclusive, and responsive institutional actions are necessary to increase equal access to post-secondary education. All students regardless of their background should have an equitable opportunity to access post-secondary education. However, students from marginalized and underrepresented groups continue to be disproportionately impacted by institutional barriers. Across Canada, Indigenous children are significantly more likely to leave school without a high school diploma.¹²⁷ According to a 2016 census reported by HEQCO (2019), it indicated that the post-secondary education attainment rate for Indigenous students is 26 percentage points below that of the general population.¹²⁸ These barriers are significant for students who have not yet finished secondary school or who do not meet the requirements to enroll in a post-secondary institution. Without intervention, these students may face extended delays or be excluded all together, thus perpetuating cycles of exclusion and underrepresentation. The provincial government should develop a grant for universities to create and enhance existing outreach programs that provide opportunities to meet post-secondary requirements. This would ensure that students who do not follow a traditional pathway are still able to access the education that they desire to reach their goals.

Information and outreach efforts are significant measures when achieving equity in post-secondary access. In order to make a well-informed decision about their future, prospective students should have easily accessible and clear information on the variety of educational pathways. Outreach initiatives help increase awareness and understanding of post-secondary pathways for those who would not otherwise consider post-secondary education as a viable option.¹²⁹ However, current outreach initiatives remain inconsistent and fail to meet this need. 60 percent of first-generation Ontarians aged 25-34 completed post-secondary education, whereas 81 percent of non first generation Ontarians whose parents had post-secondary experience.¹³⁰ Due to a lack of targeted funding and evaluation, outreach efforts for underrepresented groups in particular, remain inconsistent and ineffective in improving access to post-secondary education. This is particularly prevalent for those who are less likely to be exposed to post-secondary education within their own networks or neighbourhoods.¹³¹ Because of this, students may not obtain the information or assistance that they need to fully understand available options or to confidently pursue them. To address this, MCURES should renew funding to account for inflation each year for the OPAIP to allow post-secondary institutions to continue to use it to deliver enhanced outreach programs

¹²⁷ Robson, Jennifer. 2018. "Post-Secondary Access." *Ontario 360*. <https://on360.ca/policy-papers/post-secondary-access/>

¹²⁸ Deller, Fiona., Amy Kaufman, Rosanna Tamburri. 2019. *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Toronto: Research Report. <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Formatted-Access-Paper.pdf#:~:text=26%20percentage%20points%20below%20that,25%E2%80%9334%20Year%20Olds%20in%20Ontario>

¹²⁹ Chatoor, Ken., Rachel Courts, Jeniffer Han, Victoria Barclay, Julia Colyar. 2022. *Access Programs in Ontario: OPAIP and Pathways to Education*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Toronto: Research Report. <https://heqco.ca/pub/access-programs-in-ontario-opaip-and-pathways-to-education/>

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

for students. This would enable institutions to target and reach more students, especially those from underrepresented groups.

It is imperative that outreach initiatives emphasize non-traditional and culturally relevant options to post-secondary education. According to Statistics Canada, in the 2022-2023 year, 332,090 individuals who identified as members of visible minority populations, including those who reported more than one visible minority group or identifying with other designated minority groups were enrolled in an undergraduate degree.¹³² In 2022, McMaster opened a Black Student Success Centre which provides a range of services including but not limited to mentorship and financial aid to support the academic, personal, and professional needs of students.¹³³ By doing this, it allows students from various backgrounds to feel that their experiences and aspirations are reflected in the system. Programs that fail to take into account the lived experiences of its students run the risk of alienating the people that they are meant to assist and support. The provincial government should task the HEQCO, in publishing best practice guidelines for post-secondary institutions' outreach initiatives, ensuring those initiatives support students and applicants' informed decision making on post-secondary pathways. Institutions would be able to ensure that their outreach programs are consistently intended to promote fair participation and long-term success.

FINANCIAL LITERACY & SUPPORT

Principle: Early financial investment into a long-term education savings plan can help prospective students pursue post-secondary education.

Principle: Students and their support systems should be able to access financial literacy programs to better understand financial aid systems and encourage pursuit of their desired post-secondary pathway.

Concern: Delayed investment in RESPs, and post-secondary financial planning can have long-term consequences on prospective student's ability to access and afford higher education.

Concern: Insufficient awareness of financial aid, support services, and resources, along with untimely dissemination of this information can hinder students' ability to realize that post-secondary education is a viable option.

Concern: First generation students may face disproportionate barriers in developing financial literacy and receiving consistent support from their families when financing post-secondary education.

Concern: Prospective students may not have the financial literacy required to access post-secondary education.

Concern: The lack of transparency around post-secondary loan repayment may prevent students from accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should work with the federal government to allow for retroactive contributions to the RESP program, for those born prior to 2024.

Recommendation: The provincial government should invest in informational programs and campaigns for financial aid and existing scholarship databases to prospective students and their support systems.

¹³² Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0268-01 Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments by Visible Minority Group, Educational Qualification, Field of Study (STEM and BHASE (non-STEM) groupings), Gender and Age. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710026801-eng>

¹³³ "Building Powerful Connections:" Black Student Success Centre Marks One-Year Anniversary. *McMaster University*, February 7, 2023, <https://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/articles/black-student-success-centre-anniversary/>

Recommendation: The provincial government should, in consultation with third-party education organizations, develop a free online financial literacy course focused on saving for and understanding post-secondary education financing and loan payment.

Only 15 percent of overall Canadians believe they have strong financial literacy skills.¹³⁴ Research affirms that early financial investment into a long-term education savings plan can help prospective students pursue post-secondary education. As such, consequently, measures such as delayed investment in RESPs, and post-secondary financial planning can have long-term consequences on prospective student's ability to access and afford higher education. To address this, the provincial government should work with the federal government to allow for retroactive contributions to the RESP program, for those born prior to 2024.

Insufficient awareness of financial aid, support services, and resources, along with untimely dissemination of this information can hinder students' ability to realize that post-secondary education is a viable option. 34 percent of those 18-24 years old in North America have chosen not to pursue higher education due to the financial burden associated with accessing post-secondary education.¹³⁵ The overall lack of transparency around post-secondary loan repayment may prevent students from accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education. As such, the provincial government should invest in informational programs and campaigns for financial aid and existing scholarship databases to prospective students and their support systems.

Lastly, potential students may not have the financial literacy required to access post-secondary education.¹³⁶ Students and their support systems should be able to access financial literacy programs to better understand financial aid systems and encourage pursuit of their desired post-secondary pathway. For example, first generation students face disproportionate barriers in developing financial literacy and receiving consistent support from their families when financing post-secondary education.¹³⁷ Thus, the provincial government should, in consultation with third-party education organizations, develop a free online financial literacy course focused on saving for and understanding post-secondary education financing and loan payment.

K-12 EDUCATION

STREAMING

Principle: Students should be able to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education without undue pressure that imposes academic limitations on their actions.

¹³⁴ Bazian, Grant. "Financial Literacy in Canada: Lack of Skills and Education Contributing to Surging Consumer Debt." MNP Consumer Debt Index (MNP Ltd.), November 1, 2018. Accessed August 11, 2025.

¹³⁵ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. "Current Term Enrollment Estimates." *NSC Research Center*, May 22, 2025. Accessed August 11, 2025. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>.

¹³⁶ *Financial Consumer Agency of Canada*. "Pedagogical Solution to Financial Illiteracy in Canada: Increasing the Accessibility of Higher Education." *Building Better Financial Futures Challenge*, Financial Consumer Agency of Canada. Last modified November 24, 2023. Accessed August 11, 2025. <https://www.canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency/programs/research/2022-building-better-financial-futures-challenge/pedagogical-solution-financial-literacy-canada.html#toc5>.

¹³⁷ Employment and Social Development Canada. *Exploring Challenges to Accessing Post-Secondary Education for At-Risk Youth/Young Adults: Final Report*. Gatineau, QC: Employment and Social Development Canada, February 2019. Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc., contract G9292-191868-001-CY. Accessed August 11, 2025. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2019/esdc-esdc/Em20-119-2019-eng.pdf

Principle: Schools undergoing destreaming should have adequate staff and resources to train educators on changes and to meet students' academic needs with appropriate learning supports.

Principles: Educational staff should refrain from influencing students with their biases towards specific streams and post-secondary pathways.

Concern: The stigmatization associated with 'applied' streams has pressured students to enroll in classes that are not the right fit for them, hindering their academic and career success.

Concern: The difficulties presented when switching between various streams acts as a barrier for students to qualify for their post-secondary pathway of choice.

Concern: Students are required to make choices about their stream before they understand the courses required for their post-secondary pathways.

Concern: Many students who have Individual Education Plan (IEPs), an/or from marginalized groups are often influenced into the Applied stream, even in cases where they may succeed more in the Academic stream.

Concern: While the province has de-streamed mandatory compulsory courses for grade nine, some schools receive inadequate support to implement the changes.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should extend de-streamed compulsory courses to grade 10 and all grade 9 courses, and ensure schools are adequately supported in the destreaming process.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should mandate and support school boards that continue to offer streamed grade 10 courses in developing a strategic plan to provide grade nine students and their families with clear, accessible information on the distinction between academic and applied streams and their corresponding post-secondary pathways.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education, through advisory groups, should consult with educational staff, students and their families to understand a holistic view of school needs to create implementation policies and guidelines regarding streaming and switching streams.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should review current curriculum for de-streamed grade nine core courses to ensure equal synthesis between academic and applied streams, with opportunities for additional learning.

Students should be able to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education without undue pressure that imposes academic limitations on their actions. However, streaming in secondary schools, has found to have profound effects on students, as placement into distinct pathways, directly impacts student academic outcomes, social relationships and self-concepts.¹³⁸ Streaming in Ontario schools historically since 1999 had students deciding their academic pathways as young as grade eight, an age too young to make decisions which have long-term consequences, resulting in negative alterations to their career trajectories. The system of applied and academic courses in grades nine and ten, would be prerequisites for a range of "destination-based" courses in grades 11 and 12 which influence post-secondary options and career opportunities.¹³⁹ However, despite intending to be a system that was equitable for students, it still resulted in students grouped into separate tracks entirely, rather than only taking applied level courses for the subjects that they face academic limitations in. This has been found in data collected by the Ministry of Education, where in 2014, 62 percent of students who took applied mathematics took 3 or more applied courses. This results in students being forced into tracks that are not

¹³⁸ Tsuchida, Jenna. Streaming in Ontario High Schools: Exploring Student Experiences. M.A. thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2016.

¹³⁹ People for Education. Streaming Students: Excerpt. Toronto: People for Education, 2015.

appropriate for them, and are not aware of the long-term career and post-secondary impacts their choice selections have in grade nine and ten.

While the Ontario Government has implemented the destreaming of grade nine, in 2021, only a mere 20 percent of schools report having adequate support to implement a destreamed grade nine system.¹⁴⁰ Schools undergoing destreaming should have adequate staff and resources to train educators on changes and to meet students' academic needs with appropriate learning supports. However, principals across Ontario report the need for reduced class size and more professional development for educators to effectively support students in destreamed classrooms. The Ministry of Education should review the current curriculum for de-streamed grade nine core courses to ensure that there is equal synthesis between academic and applied streams, with opportunities for additional learning that is attainable in educational spaces. Included in increased professional development sessions the Ministry must work with the Ontario Teachers' Federation to assess educator biases for university stream courses, and determine how to effectively minimize the influence of such bias in classrooms. The discussion of the reframing of postsecondary education and career goals in school spaces, so that an educator's bias of a specific pathway, is not influencing students is critical. Students in varying course levels, from applied to scholars level, report varying levels of educator bias towards certain pathways, resulting in an overall overbearing trend of encouragement of University Programs as an expected next step in post-secondary education.¹⁴¹ The ability of educational staff to influence students with their biases is significant and is why they should refrain from expressing biases in educational spaces. Currently, many Principals and secondary school teachers, report their need for increased support from the Ministry of Education and the province to achieve effective destreaming.¹⁴² The Ministry of Education should mandate and implement a strategic plan to help educators and support staff to connect grade nine students and their families with accessible information clarifying the contrasts between the academic and applied streams, and their corresponding post-secondary pathways, to make it a transparent process, and prevent assumptions about differing streams.

Streams have become increasingly associated with stigmas and stereotypes. For instance, as applied pathways are assumed to lead to college/apprenticeships or directly to the workforce, it is associated with much lower educator expectations and increased leniency, leading to detrimental impacts on the achievements and drive of the students enrolled in such courses.¹⁴³ Furthermore, the stigma tied to the applied stream, negatively affects students' self-perception and academic performance.¹⁴⁴ This stigma also prevents students who may be in an "enriched" or academic stream but struggle in a subject area from taking an applied course to learn at an appropriate pace, preventing them from having a successful educational experience in that subject. Furthermore, the limited abilities to freely switch between streams after having taken an applied course in a given subject acts as another barrier, especially when students want to qualify for specific post-secondary pathways when applying in grade 12 plus.¹⁴⁵

In alignment with the recommendations made by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which is followed by the other provinces and territories of Canada, the delayed stratification

¹⁴⁰ People for Education. 2023. "Implementation of de-streaming in Ontario Hampered by Lack of Time and Resources." People for Education (Toronto), November 13. Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/our-work/implementation-of-de-streaming-in-ontario-hampered-by-lack-of-time-and-resources/>

¹⁴¹ Tsuchida, Jenna. Streaming in Ontario High Schools: Exploring Student Experiences. Master's thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2016.

¹⁴² Balintec, Vanessa. 2023. "More Schools Are Having a Hard Time De-streaming Grade 9 Students, Survey Suggests." CBC News, November 13. Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-de-streaming-survey-2023-1.7027067>

¹⁴³ Tsuchida, Jenna. Streaming in Ontario High Schools: Exploring Student Experiences. MA thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, June 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Thompson, Tianna. "The Pathway to De-streaming." Education Forum, May 19, 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

processes of streaming until upper secondary levels, is essential for students to understand the consequences of the stream they choose to enroll in. For this reason, we believe that Ontario should mandate its Ministry of Education to implement the destreaming of grade ten, to further push back the stratification of secondary education to grade 11, as the current de-streaming of only grade nine, fails to prevent a return to the inequalities that existed with streaming in grade ten.¹⁴⁶

This is also key in preventing the streaming of marginalized populations such as Black and Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students identified with special education needs (e.g. students with IEPs, excluding gifted), who are overrepresented in Applied classes.¹⁴⁷ This can be associated with the systemic and oppressive trend of numerous documented examples of teachers and guidance counselors pressuring marginalized students into applied streams, or failing to provide them with complete information to make informed choices.¹⁴⁸ Currently, the de-streaming efforts in grade nine failed to be an equal transition for all schools, as the distribution of de-streaming supports were more prevalent in schools located within higher median family income neighborhoods, further preventing those in lower-socioeconomic backgrounds from receiving adequate resources to help them academically succeed.¹⁴⁹

It is critical that the ministry of education ensures that when providing resources to schools during destreaming changes, it is essential that they are provided equitably according to needs assessed by required stakeholders.¹⁵⁰ To achieve this, The Ministry of Education should consult with educational staff, students and their families to understand school needs to create implementation policies and guidelines regarding: class sizes, mandated ratios of educational staff, culturally competent classrooms and to evaluate the outcomes of destreaming.¹⁵¹

CAREER STUDIES COURSE CURRICULUM

Principle: The Grade 10 Career Studies course is a crucial opportunity to inform and educate students about pursuing post-secondary education and should be used to fill students' gaps in knowledge.

Concern: Many students lack exposure to support systems that can provide guidance on post-secondary pathways and benefits while the secondary school curriculum has traditionally been ineffective with providing this knowledge.

Concern: Many students lack the knowledge needed to make an informed decision about entering university and college streams.

Concern: Many students lack exposure to how various post-secondary pathways can affect future employment opportunities.

¹⁴⁶ People for Education. "Implementation of de-streaming in Ontario Hampered by Lack of Time and Resources." People for Education (Toronto), November 13, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ To, Jason. "Academic Streaming: Part 1 – Why It's Just the Worst." Jason To blog, July 7, 2020. Accessed August 6, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ People for Education. "Implementation of de-streaming in Ontario Hampered by Lack of Time and Resources." People for Education (Toronto), November 13, 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Clandfield, David, Bruce Curtis, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Alison Gaymes San Vicente, D.W. Livingstone, and Harry Smaller. Restacking the Deck: Streaming by Class, Race and Gender in Ontario Schools. Our Schools/Our Selves Special Issue. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Winter 2014. Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://crpstem.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/restacking-the-deck.pdf>.

¹⁵¹ Ontario Teachers' Federation. Navigating De-Streaming: OTF and Affiliate Feedback on the Ministry of Education's A Guide to De-streaming. January 2021. Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://www.otffeo.on.ca/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/Navigating-De-Streaming-OTF-and-Affiliate-Feedback-on-the-Ministry-of-Education%E2%80%99s-A-Guide-to-De-streaming.pdf>.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should 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 10 Career Studies curriculum.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should extend Career Studies curriculum beyond Grade 10, and amend it to educate students about the outcomes of streaming decisions, in order to inform their decisions on post-secondary options and employment opportunities.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses with detailed guidelines explaining various post-secondary pathways, and the viable employment opportunities that each pathway could lead to.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses to ensure that the financial literacy skills needed to navigate post-secondary financial systems are taught.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses with detailed guidelines on how to establish co-ops, shadowing opportunities, summer jobs and internships to explore various career paths.

The Grade 10 Career Studies course is currently the only opportunity for the structured delivery of information about post-secondary education to K-12 students, and is therefore a crucial opportunity to fill gaps in knowledge.¹⁵² Given that students come from diverse backgrounds with varying sociocultural influences and perceptions of post-secondary education, it is essential to take advantage of opportunities to provide standardized knowledge about the importance of pursuing higher education. Much of what students know about post-secondary education is influenced by peer groups and parents, which, for students whose parents did not pursue higher education, puts some students at a disadvantage.¹⁵³ Thus, it is essential that the Ministry of Education provide opportunities to disseminate information to students so that they can make well-informed decisions about pursuing further education, and so that existing knowledge gaps are not widened.

In 2024, the Ministry of Education conducted an overhaul of the course curriculum to reflect the knowledge gaps and current needs of Ontario's diverse population.¹⁵⁴ The revised course format includes sections on encouraging students to develop self-awareness of various social and cultural influences that could impact their career and educational goals. As well, students are required to investigate and develop detailed plans for pathways to post-secondary education, including university and college program options, financial aid, financial literacy, and admission requirements. As a result of these recent changes, OUSA is pleased with the potential that the current careers course has to impact underrepresented groups and their access to higher education. We would like to see this course continue to address specific barriers experienced by underrepresented groups, including low-income, first generation, rural, northern, racialized, and Indigenous students. Given these novel changes and the importance of this course, OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Education conduct reviews, at least every three years, to monitor the efficacy of the course and its impact on underrepresented groups. Such reviews should include direct consultation with participating students and teachers (to evaluate short term benefits) and students exiting high school and participating in post-secondary education (to evaluate long-term benefits). Consultations should be accompanied by data collection on post-secondary enrolment for under-represented groups. The success of this course should be evaluated by collecting demographic

¹⁵² Ontario Ministry of Education. "GLC2O Guide." *Ontario Ministry of Education*. Accessed August 6, 2025.

<https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/glc2o-guide>.

¹⁵³ Deller, F., Kaufman, A. & Tamburri, R. (2019). *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

¹⁵⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education. "Published Plans and Annual Reports 2024-2025." Government of Ontario. Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/published-plans-and-annual-reports-2024-2025-ministry-education>.

data to measure changes in enrollment for underrepresented groups and positive student and teacher opinions. Additionally, some students may select university or college streams based on a lack of information, which can further lower their chances of pursuing post-secondary education. In line with OUSA's recommendation to postpone streaming decisions to grades eleven and twelve, we recommend that the Ministry of Education amend the Career Studies course curriculum to account for this change. The course should include a component where students learn about the differences between streaming options, the post-secondary education and career pathways associated with each stream, and how to make informed decisions based on their unique learning style.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION, GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS, AND SUPPORT STAFF

Principle: School administration, guidance counsellors and support staff, should foster an environment where students are able to learn, thrive, and plan for their future.

Principle: Guidance counsellors are a valuable resource for breaking down informational barriers in regards to all possible post-secondary education choices, including part-time studies and pre-degree programs.

Principle: BIPOC staff can positively impact school climates and promote academic success, by providing representative and culturally informed supports for marginalized students.

Principle: Mental health services should be integrated into academic support structures to ensure students can succeed without barriers caused by mental health struggles.

Concern: Students can have negative or unhelpful experiences in their school's guidance department since counselors often lack adequate training, time, and resources preventing the exploration of post-secondary pathways.

Concern: The insufficient number of support staff in schools causes them to take on additional responsibilities, diverting their focus from curriculum delivery and resulting in students falling behind academically.

Concern: BIPOC students often face inequitable treatment from staff leading to lower academic performances, disproportionate suspensions rates, and decreased interest in post-secondary programs.

Concern: BIPOC students are underrepresented among educational staff and may not be adequately supported by support staff who lack similar lived experiences.

Concern: Due to a lack of adequate mental health and wellness support staff, guidance counselors and teachers are allocating more of their resources to managing student mental health concerns, diverting their focus from curriculum and academic resource delivery.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should regularly update guidance resources to encompass the diverse post-secondary pathways in Ontario to ensure guidance counselors remain informed and unbiased on the varying ways to attain a higher education.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should 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.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should study guidance counsellors- to- student ration and provide funding to increase staffing and on-on-one support time.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should mandate and incorporate cultural sensitivity and anti-racism classroom supports for administrators, guidance counselors, and support staff into their

strategic plan to ensure that all students are provided with an equitable and high-quality secondary education experience.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should assess and address recruitment board biases and design pathways to facilitate licensing of educators from underrepresented groups to address the need for more support staff, and the lack of diversity in school staff.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should commission research on the retention rates of BIPOC educational staff, the systemic barriers impeding on BIPOC staff retention, and the growing need for BIPOC educational staff in rural and northern communities

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should provide grant funding for school boards to hire and recruit BIPOC educational staff according to local school and community needs.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should consult with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to fund and regulate their proposed mental health and well-being teams based on student population.

Education literature shows the importance of school administrators such as school principals, in creating a school climate that is conducive for learning and innovation to foster engaging learning environments where students are able to learn, thrive, and plan for their future.¹⁵⁵ Teachers' use of new educational strategies, for instance, have shown to be more common and have higher implementation quality when teachers are able to trust and work with their educational colleges. However, numerous school administrative staff across Ontario have been found to have failed to treat marginalized students equitably, resulting in lower school performances, and higher and unproportionate rates of suspensions.¹⁵⁶ To ensure that school administrators are held accountable for discriminatory practices, and safety measures are in place to protect vulnerable students, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, to increase accountability and transparency,¹⁵⁷ should regulate administrative measures for racially motivated situations, and mandate the incorporation of cultural sensitivity and anti-racism classroom supports for administrators, guidance counselors, and support staff into their strategic plan to ensure that all students are provided with an equitable and high-quality secondary education experience.

In addition to teachers and school administration, guidance counsellors play a vital role in schools by supporting and promoting student's well-being and growth in the following areas; personal, interpersonal and career development. Their responsibility of helping students determine postsecondary and career trajectories and are thus referred to as core members of an in-school support team as outlined in the 2010 Caring and Safe Schools document.¹⁵⁸ While guidance counsellors are a valuable resource for breaking down informational barriers in regards to all possible post-secondary education choices, including part-time studies and pre-degree programs, they are also expected to support students mental health concerns. They also play a key role in Specialist High Skills Majors, cooperative education, and other forms of experiential learning offered in schools. It is critical counselors are trained in cultural sensitivities, and equipped by the Ministry to engage in life-long learning about equity, diversity, inclusion

¹⁵⁵ Cavanagh, Sean, and Michele Molnar. "Regardless of Their Titles, CAOs Set Tone for Academics." Education Week, March 16, 2015. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/regardless-of-their-titles-caos-set-tone-for-academics/2015/03>; Atkins, Marc S., Elise Cappella, Elisa S. Shernoff, Tara G. Mehta, and Erika L. Gustafson. "Schooling and Children's Mental Health: Realigning Resources to Reduce Disparities and Advance Public Health." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 13 (2017): 123-147. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032816-045234>.

¹⁵⁶ "Ontario to End 'Discriminatory' Practice of Academic Streaming in Grade 9." CBC News, July 6, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-to-end-discriminatory-practice-of-academic-streaming-in-grade-9-1.5635665>.

¹⁵⁷ Ontario Human Rights Commission. What We Heard: Report on Anti-Black Racism in Education Roundtables. Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/what-we-heard-report-anti-black-racism-education-roundtables>.

¹⁵⁸ People for Education. Guidance Counsellors: Ontario's High School System and Equity. People for Education, June 2018. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Guidance-counsellors.pdf>.

and decolonization (EDI-D) during their career. This is essential as currently, counselors in Ontario are merely recommended that “they complete three additional qualification (AQ) courses.”¹⁵⁹ This is a significant disservice to Ontarian students as in contrast, Québécois guidance counselors must achieve 96 credits (via specialized bachelor’s & master’s degrees) in areas directly related to career counselling. The limited extent of training which Ontario counselors receive remains the standard today despite research and OECD reports underlining the current lack of competencies fulfilled by Ontario school counsellors, of which some even perceive themselves as incompetent due knowledge discrepancies in various domains, which is further worsened by the expectation to do tasks unrelated to their profession. These tasks include graduation ceremony organization and other administrative tasks, which take up to 40 percent of their time, which is directly taken away from students 1-on-1 time with counselors for their well-rounded growth in crucial professional and academic areas.¹⁶⁰ This impact is felt by students who often report having negative or unhelpful interactions with their advisors, resulting in some students losing trust in the advising system entirely, preventing thorough exploration of post-secondary pathways. By working alongside the Ontario School Counsellors’ Association, the Ministry of Education should evaluate and conduct a review of the ratio of guidance counselors to students served on a yearly basis and provide funding to increase staffing and on-on-one support time. The Ministry should also regularly update guidance resources to encompass the diverse post-secondary pathways in Ontario to ensure guidance counselors remain informed and unbiased on the varying ways to attain a higher education. Alongside this initiative, the Ministry of Education should ensure that all guidance counselors have ongoing developmental training alongside their Additional Qualifications courses, with an option to specialize in matters related to post-secondary education and mental health. In alignment with the recommendations for effective career guidance by the OECD,¹⁶¹ the Ministry of Education should reevaluate and establish improved guidance counselor training minimum requirements.¹⁶²

Support staff are another vital key member of the smooth operations of the school system. With most Ontario Schools having students requiring special educational assistance, support staff are crucial in ensuring classroom environments are engaging for all students. Support staff includes; special education resource teachers and educational assistants, of which 95 percent and 79 percent of Ontarian secondary schools have a minimum of one each. When there is a lack of educational assistant shortages, students with these needs are more likely to stay home. And when students are in class, the staff who are present are under extra stress, and unable to focus on their primary role.¹⁶³ Teachers are often diverting their focus from curriculum delivery and resulting in students falling behind academically due to lack of support staff in schools. Another crucial support staff member that is in dire need in Ontario Schools are psychologists, as 28 percent of schools report inadequate access to one in recent years, doubling from the percentage with no access in 2011. This results in teachers and other educators forced to mitigate this crisis in their classrooms, redirecting their time from academic and professional development.¹⁶⁴ With the ongoing mental health crisis among the youth student population, it is imperative the Ministry of Education consults the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to fund and regulate their proposed

¹⁵⁹ Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association. Regulation of School Counsellors in Canada. Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2014. https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/RegulationSchoolCounsellors_en.pdf; Maisonneuve, Alexander, and Andre Samson. "Ontario's School Counsellors Need More Resources to Support Student Career Development." *CareerWise*, May 31, 2021. <https://careerwise.ceric.ca/2021/05/31/ontarios-school-counsellors-lack-training-resources-to-support-student-career-development/>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Career Guidance: A Handbook for Policy Makers. OECD, 2004. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2004/12/career-guidance_g1gh4251/9789264015210-en.pdf.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ People for Education. Access to Special Education in Ontario Schools: The Gaps and Challenges. People for Education. Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/our-work/access-to-special-education-in-ontario-schools-the-gaps-and-challenges/>.

¹⁶⁴ Collie, Meghan. "Canadian School Counsellors Are Stretched Thin — and It's Our Students That Suffer." *Global News*, September 24, 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6464554/canadian-school-counsellors-stretched-thin/>.

mental health and well-being teams based on student population, of hiring five support workers for every 700 students.¹⁶⁵ By doing so and integrating mental health services into academic support structures, schools can help support and prepare students to adapt and overcome barriers caused by mental health struggles.

An inclusive classroom is the first step to creating an education environment that is promoting positive student attitudes and values alongside improved critical thinking and knowledge attainment.¹⁶⁶ However the diversity of the Ontario population is often not reflected in its educators,¹⁶⁷ resulting in marginalized students failing to see themselves represented in academic institutions as frequently. BIPOC staff can positively impact school climates and promote academic success, by providing representative and culturally informed support for marginalized students as BIPOC students may not be adequately supported by support staff who lack similar lived experiences. Programs such as Ontario's *Supporting the Success of Black Students* and the *Graduation Coach Program for Black Students*,¹⁶⁸ has allowed for increased investments into local based mentorship and tutoring programs by connecting black students to graduation coaches to work in schools and with educational leadership. As cited by students, the graduation coach program, which connected over one thousand black students to coaches between fall 2019 and February of 2022, made significant strides and impacts on student experiences by providing students with support staff with comparable lived experiences. Such programs depict how representation of the local student body by maintaining a qualified and diverse school personnel helps create school cultures that "challenge stereotypes, replace inequitable systems, and build learning environments rooted in respect, high expectations, and inclusivity," allowing for increased student achievement.¹⁶⁹ For a discriminatory free hiring process amongst educational staff, the Ministry of Education should assess and address recruitment board biases and design pathways to facilitate licensing of educators from underrepresented groups to address the need for more support staff, and the lack of diversity in educational staff.¹⁷⁰ To increase effective employment outreach for diverse and representational school personnel, The Ministry of Education should commission research on the retention rates of BIPOC educational staff, the systemic barriers impeding on BIPOC staff retention, and the growing need for BIPOC educational staff in rural and northern communities and provide grant funding for school boards to hire and recruit BIPOC educational staff based on local school and community needs. Furthermore the Ministry should reassess, modify, and re-release the 2009 Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.

RETENTION & ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Principle: Every student should have an equitable opportunity to achieve academic success and complete pre-bachelor education.

¹⁶⁵ Tranjan, Ricardo, Tania Oliveira, and Randy Robinson. *Catching Up Together*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario, February 2022.

<https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Ontario%20Office/2022/02/Catching%20Up%20Together.pdf>.

¹⁶⁶ Kite, Mary E., and Patricia Clark. "The Benefits of Diversity in Education." APA Teacher Network, September 8, 2022.

[https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psychology-teacher-network/introductory-psychology/benefits-of-diversity#:~:text=An%20inclusive%20classroom%20also%20provides%20global%20academic,people%20in%20their%20communities%20increases%20\(Bowman%2C%202011\).](https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psychology-teacher-network/introductory-psychology/benefits-of-diversity#:~:text=An%20inclusive%20classroom%20also%20provides%20global%20academic,people%20in%20their%20communities%20increases%20(Bowman%2C%202011).)

¹⁶⁷ Turner Consulting Group. "Teacher Diversity Gap." Tana's Blog, October 30, 2014. <https://www.turnerconsultinggroup.ca/tanas-blog/teacher-diversity-gap>.

¹⁶⁸ Government of Ontario. *Ontario Supporting the Success of Black Students*. News release, February 25, 2022.

<https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001660/ontario-supporting-the-success-of-black-students>.

¹⁶⁹ New Leaders. "Why Representation Matters in Our Schools." New Leaders Blog, September 21, 2021.

<https://www.newleaders.org/blog/why-representation-matters-in-our-schools>.

¹⁷⁰ Shizha, Edward, Ali A. Abdi, Stacey Wilson-Forsberg, and Oliver Masakure. "African Immigrant Students and Postsecondary Education in Canada: High School Teachers and School Career Counsellors as Gatekeepers." *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 52, no. 3 (2020): 67+. Gale Literature Resource Center (accessed August 7, 2025).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A650605701/LitRC?u=lond95336&sid=summon&xid=c9398eb9>.

Principle: Success and retention in post-secondary education is correlated to success in pre-bachelor education.

Concern: Students from underrepresented groups may have exposure to inadequate levels of inter-generational knowledge that would promote interest in post-secondary education.

Concern: Many of the groups that are underrepresented in post-secondary education also experience disproportionately high secondary school dropout rates.

Concern: Some secondary school students lack adequate access to the resources that enable academic success and maintain motivation to continue with their education.

Concern: Students with limited access to digital learning tools fall disproportionately behind in online learning environments, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can further exacerbate dropout rates.

Concern: Suspensions do not adequately rehabilitate students and equip them with the skills and confidence to achieve academic success upon return.

Concern: Black and Indigenous students are disproportionately affected by suspensions and expulsions.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should provide grant funding for school boards to provide structured programming for students facing suspensions.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should mandate the meaningful collection and promotion of race-based data surrounding suspensions and expulsions.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should provide envelope funding to school boards to hire teaching staff to develop in-school financially accessible tutoring centres in secondary schools.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should provide increased funding for the expansion of mentorship and support programs in order to permit a wider reach to underrepresented populations.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education's Learning Recovery Action Plan should include specific actions to combat those who were disproportionately impacted by the shift to an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation: The provincial government should continue to invest in the Broadband Access for All Students Initiative as well as the expansion of broadband in public libraries in underserved communities.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should create a consolidated grant for technology within the Grants for Student Needs to help purchase, maintain, and repair digital tools for secondary students.

Considering the social and economic¹⁷¹ benefits that come with higher education, every student should have an equitable opportunity to achieve academic success and complete pre-bachelor education. Success and retention in post-secondary education is correlated to success in pre-bachelor education, as well as being often required for admission and enrolment. Students with higher grades in high school are more likely to pursue and attend post-secondary.¹⁷² Post-secondary institutions often set admissions standards including competitive thresholds for grades. Administrative data set from British Columbia showcased that high school course marks are a key determinant of both high school graduation and post-secondary enrollment.¹⁷³ Students who are poorly positioned to achieve such standards are faced with substantial barriers to accessing and participating in post-secondary education.

¹⁷¹ Frenette, Marc. "High School Academic Performance and Earnings by Postsecondary Field of Study." *Statistics Canada*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202300400001-eng>

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

The lack of intergenerational awareness regarding post-secondary pathways is a substantial challenge that students face. Students whose parents or guardians did not attend post-secondary institutions often lack exposure to informal guidance, support, and advice that influence academic motivation and aspirations. High school students who come from a family where neither parent completed post-secondary education are 33 percentage points less likely to complete post-secondary education themselves.¹⁷⁴ One of the strongest indicators of secondary school completion and post-secondary enrollment is their so-called “predisposition to post-secondary education.”¹⁷⁵ This is a stage that refers to a student’s early awareness and interest towards pursuing post-secondary education and is influenced by figures such as parents and teachers.¹⁷⁶ However, for students who did not have influential figures that attended post-secondary education, it may be a hindering factor. Not having familial “university experience” has been shown as being a hindrance to a wide range of aspects relating to the university application process including not understanding costs, financial aid opportunities, and programs of study.¹⁷⁷ This demonstrates a student’s lack of clear understanding of how to navigate the higher education landscape, limiting early exposure to post-secondary planning.

Underrepresented students are disproportionately more likely to encounter barriers when accessing post-secondary education. In addition to the absence of intergenerational awareness, many students lack access to the resources and assistance that are necessary to sustain their academic success. Lack of motivation with explanations for this being lack of encouragement, self-doubt, lack of ambition, and a poor high school experience serve as some reasons as to why a student may choose not to pursue post-secondary education.¹⁷⁸ When students lack adequate access to the resources that enable academic success, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the motivation to continue with their education. Consequently, underrepresented students experience disproportionately high secondary school dropout rates. Black students dropped out of high school at twice the rate of non-racialized students (20% versus 11 percent).¹⁷⁹ The Ministry of Education should provide envelope funding to school boards to hire teaching staff to develop in-school financially accessible tutoring centres in secondary schools.

The shift to online learning environments have brought challenges to students with limited access to digital learning tools. Not all students have access to computers or reliable internet at home, and although there has been an increase in technology use, access to technology varies significantly from school to school.¹⁸⁰ 68 percent of elementary schools and 22 percent of secondary schools specifically fundraise for technology.¹⁸¹ Students who lack access to adequate devices and/or a reliable internet connection may struggle to keep up academically and feel isolated from their instructor and peers. 97 percent of elementary schools and 100 percent of secondary schools report that at least some teachers use

¹⁷⁴ Deller, Fiona., Amy Kaufman, and Rosanna Tamburri. 2019. *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Formatted-Access-Paper.pdf>

¹⁷⁵ Robson, Jennifer. 2018. “Post-Secondary Access.” *Ontario 360*. <https://on360.ca/policy-papers/post-secondary-access/>

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Robson, Karen., Reana Maier, Paul Anisef, and Robert Brown. 2019. *High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Formatted-Access-Paper.pdf> <https://heqco.ca/pub/high-school-success-and-access-to-postsecondary-education/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20report%2C%20High.who%20confirmed%20acceptance%20of%20an>

¹⁷⁸ “Exploring Challenges to Accessing Post-secondary Education for At-Risk Youth/Young Adults.” 2019. Employment and Social Development Canada. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2019/edsc-esdc/Em20-119-2019-eng.pdf

¹⁷⁹ “The State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous, and Racialized Youth.” 2023. *Laidlaw Foundation*. [https://laidlawfdn.org/assets/the-state-of-black-and-indigenous-youth-nov-2023-\(final-copy\)-\(1\).pdf](https://laidlawfdn.org/assets/the-state-of-black-and-indigenous-youth-nov-2023-(final-copy)-(1).pdf)

¹⁸⁰ “Connecting to Success: Technology in Ontario Schools.” 2019. People for Education. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/connecting-to-success-technology-in-ontario-schools/#:~:text=From%202014,Auditor%20General%20of%20Ontario%2C%202018>

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

technology to communicate with students.¹⁸² This further emphasizes the role that technology has in modern education and highlights how unequal access to technology can pose as a disadvantage to students both academically and socially. The Ministry of Education's Learning Recovery Action Plan should include specific actions to combat those who were disproportionately impacted by the shift to an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the provincial government should continue to invest in the Broadband Access for All Students Initiative as well as the expansion of broadband in public libraries in underserved communities. To ensure that all students are equipped to learn effectively regardless of setting, the Ministry of Education should create a consolidated grant for technology within the Grants for Student Needs to help purchase, maintain, and repair digital tools for secondary students.

Disciplinary practices can pose a substantial barrier to a students' academic success. Self-identified Indigenous students and Black students are suspended at rates much higher than their respective representation within the broader Toronto District School Board student population.¹⁸³ Although they are sometimes justified as being required to ensure school safety, suspensions rarely provide constructive support for a student's growth. In reality, this practice removes students from the classroom without providing them with the resources necessary to be successful upon their return to school. Expulsions and suspensions are not administered equitably amongst student demographics. Exclusionary disciplinary actions disproportionately affect certain groups, especially Black and Indigenous students. According to the Toronto District School Board, 42 percent of Black students have been suspended at least once compared to 18 percent of non-racialized students.¹⁸⁴ This ultimately undermines their academic achievements and sense of belonging within the school community. To address these disparities, the Ministry of Education should provide grant funding for school boards to provide structured programming for students facing suspensions. The Ministry of Education should mandate the meaningful collection and promotion of race-based data surrounding suspensions and expulsions.

EXTRACURRICULARS

Principle: All willing and qualified students should have access to extracurriculars.

Principle: Extracurriculars often encourage students' interest and success in post-secondary education and help develop students' career and education goals.

Principle: Support staff and school administration are a crucial aspect of the success of extracurriculars.

Concern: Parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds may struggle in providing additional educational opportunities they can provide for their children due to limited resources and capacity, as well as a lack of accessible information, which can limit interest in and eligibility for post-secondary education.

Concern: Extracurriculars often have cultural, social, and financial barriers that limit students' ability to participate in them, and are inaccessible to those who have to work paid jobs or are caregivers throughout secondary school.

Concern: Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not be able to access merit-based grants due to being unable to participate in extracurriculars

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ "Caring and Safe Schools Report." 2023. Toronto District School Board. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/Caring%20and%20Safe%20Schools%20Report%202022-23.pdf#:~:text=2%20year%20cohort%20graduation%20rates.by%20law%20through%20the%20Education>

¹⁸⁴ "The State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous, and Racialized Youth." 2023. Laidlaw Foundation. [https://laidlawfdn.org/assets/the-state-of-black-and-indigenous-youth_nov-2023-\(final-copy\)-\(1\).pdf](https://laidlawfdn.org/assets/the-state-of-black-and-indigenous-youth_nov-2023-(final-copy)-(1).pdf)

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should fund needs-based scholarships and stipends for students to engage in extracurriculars.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Education should develop a grant that aims to provide schools and relevant community organizations with the required funding to run a broad array of affordable and accessible extra-curricular programs, as well as the associated supplies.

Recommendation: The provincial government should develop grant funding for post-secondary institutions to provide enrichment programming for K-12 students.

Extracurriculars often encourage students' interest and success in post-secondary education and help develop students' career and education goals. However, a child's interest in and ability to eventually pursue post-secondary education should not be limited by their parents' finances. Research has shown that many children who participate in extracurriculars, especially those with an educational focus is associated with increased academic motivation, improved mental health, and better sense of belonging.¹⁸⁵ Extracurriculars offer students a space to build a diverse skill set and gain experiences that can directly contribute to their future aspirations.¹⁸⁶ Further, support staff and school administration are also a crucial aspect of the success of extracurriculars.

Research has shown that students who receive higher grades, and who have a positive postsecondary education culture (i.e., come from a family who values education) are more likely to access post-secondary education.¹⁸⁷ Unfortunately, low-income parents, including underrepresented minorities, who struggle to afford basic living necessities may also struggle to enroll their children in these extracurricular programs.¹⁸⁸ As a result, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not be able to access merit-based grants due to being unable to participate in extracurriculars. To address these concerns, the Ministry of Education should fund needs-based scholarships and stipends for students to engage in extracurriculars. Further, Ministry of Education should develop a grant that aims to provide schools and relevant community organizations with the required funding to run a broad array of affordable and accessible extra-curricular programs, as well as the associated supplies. Additionally, the provincial government should develop grant funding for post-secondary institutions to provide enrichment programming for K-12 students.

SYSTEM DATA AND INFORMATION

COLLECTING DATA

Principle: Public policy interventions that focus on improving access to post-secondary institutions should rely on comprehensive data.

Principle: Ontario's data on post-secondary quality and accessibility should be easily accessible, transparent, and informative toward the enhancement of government policy impacting the post-secondary sector.

¹⁸⁵ O'Donnell, Alexander W., Gerry Redmond, Alex A. Gardner, Joanna J. J. Wang, and Anna Mooney. 2023. "Extracurricular Activity Participation, School Belonging, and Depressed Mood: A Test of the Compensation Hypothesis during Adolescence." *Applied Developmental Science* 28 (4): 596–611. doi:10.1080/10888691.2023.2260745.

¹⁸⁶ Naomi. *Five Reasons You Should Get Involved in Extracurriculars in High School*. University of Waterloo Missing Manual. <https://uwaterloo.ca/future-students/missing-manual/high-school/five-reasons-you-should-get-involved-extracurriculars-high>.

¹⁸⁷ Alexandra Pulchny, Karen Robson, and Robert S. Brown, "Who transitions into post-secondary education and why? A systematic review of the Canadian landscape," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 11 (2025): article 101289, Elsevier, published January 1, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101289>.

¹⁸⁸ People for Education. *Inequities Persist: Extracurriculars, Clubs, Activities, and Fundraising in Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools*. People for Education, 2023. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/inequities-persist-extracurriculars-clubs-activities-and-fundraising-in-ontarios-publicly-funded-schools/>.

Principle: Data collection and research-instrument design should identify inequities faced by marginalized groups and measure progress in removing these barriers.

Concern: Data collection in Ontario is inadequate, with third-party-organizations helping to fill data availability gaps.

Concern: Students may not be adequately informed about the protection, collection, and use of their data in post-secondary institutions.

Concern: Initiatives intended to increase access for underrepresented groups cannot always be consistently and thoroughly evaluated, due to lack of information.

Concern: Lack of longitudinal data in certain areas makes measuring post-secondary access in Ontario difficult.

Concern: The collection of student longitudinal data may not be transparently communicated to students transitioning from elementary to secondary to post-secondary education.

Recommendation: The provincial government should make students aware of the data being collected throughout their education and continuously ask for consent throughout the data collection process.

Recommendation: 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.

Recommendation: The expert panel referred to in the previous recommendation should be tasked with creating a framework for a common university reporting standard for demographic data on student applications, offers, acceptances, retention, and success.

Recommendation: The provincial government should collect self-identified data regarding access to post-secondary education on all relevant protected grounds under the Ontario Human Rights Code and adopt data privacy principles stated in the Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism. .

Recommendation: The provincial government, upon the advice of the expert panel should establish robust metrics for access that should be tracked on both a recurring and longitudinal basis at both the institutional and provincial levels.

Recommendation: The provincial government should amend the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to include, from consenting individuals, important demographic information necessary to further the goals of a comprehensive access strategy.

Recommendation: The provincial government should extend aspects of the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to post-secondary students, to monitor access trends, alongside implementing a privacy policy for the protection of student demographic data.

Recommendation: The provincial government should provide funding for Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and their community organizations, to develop community research partnerships in constituencies to track diverse student pathways unique to socio-geographic environments of institutions, while respecting student anonymity.

A comprehensive approach to data collection is essential in assessing and improving how a student accesses post-secondary education. For underrepresented groups, this data plays a crucial role in equalizing post-secondary opportunities.¹⁸⁹ It would also aid in uncovering the systemic inequities that

¹⁸⁹ Karen Robson, "Ontario School Boards Require Clearer Guidance to Collect Student Census Data," *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*, July 13, 2023, <https://heqco.ca/ontario-school-boards-require-clearer-guidance-to-collect-student-census-data/>

often remain invisible in aggregate reports. The province currently lacks equitable access to post-secondary and is not collecting appropriate and adequate data to support this goal.¹⁹⁰ The collection of data will enable institutions to identify inequities and measure progress in removing these barriers.

Establishing a multi-stakeholder panel would facilitate an improved process of data collection procedures and reporting guidelines. In addition to developing a unified mechanism for reporting integral metrics such as application rates and acceptance trends, the panel would have the ability to provide recommendations based on the dissemination of the data collected. The creation of a framework of this kind would ensure that data is transparent and meaningful to all relevant stakeholders. In order to conduct meaningful analysis, the data should be collected longitudinally and be a recurring measure, spanning the entirety of a student's post-secondary journey beginning from access and ending with their post-graduation outcome. This approach would provide an avenue to identify where students encounter barriers and whether access initiatives are having a sustained impact over time. A four year tracking model is best suited as it encompasses the full experience of accessing post-secondary education. These measures would provide valuable insights into the experiences of underrepresented groups, especially those identified as protected classes under the Ontario Human Rights Code.

The provincial government should also provide funding and support community research partnerships to better document the diversity of student experiences unique to the socio-geographic environments of institutions. In order to track student pathways that are influenced by regional conditions and intersecting identities, funding should be provided to the HEQCO, and work in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and their community organizations. Regional and community-based approaches can reveal access trends that province-wide data might overlook. It is imperative that these partnerships ensure student privacy and be grounded in lived experiences, creating opportunities for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges related to access.

Meaningful data collection cannot exist without informed and ongoing consent. It is imperative that students are made aware of what data is being collected, how it will be utilized, and be an ongoing process. This is particularly important when students transition from elementary to secondary to post-secondary. The collection of student data may not be transparently communicated to students during periods of academic transition which limits their understanding of how their information is used over time. It becomes necessary to address the issues of consent between parents and students, especially when students are between the ages of sixteen to eighteen. The rules surrounding consent are different under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA) and the Education Act.¹⁹¹ Under MFIPPA, a parent or guardian can consent on behalf of children under 16, although the child may also provide consent; after the age of 16, only the student can provide consent.¹⁹² Under the Education Act, parents can consent to the use of OSR information until the student turns 18, after which only the student may do so.¹⁹³ It should be made clear when a student has the autonomous ability to consent to data collection. To maintain legal compliance and protect the rights of all parties involved, it is essential that these expectations be made clear.

Expanding the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to include demographic data is another way in how access can be monitored. The provincial government should amend the OEN registry to include,

¹⁹⁰ Ken Chatoor, Rachel Courts, Jennifer Han, Victoria Barclay, and Julia Colyar, *Access Programs in Ontario: OPAIP and Pathways to Education* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2022), <https://heqco.ca/pub/access-programs-in-ontario-opaip-and-pathways-to-education/>

¹⁹¹ Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, "Consent to Collect, Use, and Disclose Personal Information," accessed April 16, 2025, <https://www.ipc.on.ca/en/education/consent-to-collect-use-and-disclose-personal-information>

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

from consenting individuals, demographic information that is necessary to further the goals of a comprehensive access strategy. Only about 25 percent of boards have produced public results of their student census.¹⁹⁴ It is important that data is collected and published in order to provide a better understanding of the trends in access and barriers throughout the education system while ensuring robust privacy safeguards are in place. Furthermore, the provincial government should extend the OEN registry to include post-secondary students in order to track trends in access. At a provincial level, enrolment data with demographic information is limited, inconsistently collected, and inadequate.¹⁹⁵ Only 11 of 72 reports examined had questions about student experiences and outcomes.¹⁹⁶ Without consistent and comprehensive data, it is challenging to understand how some groups are systematically disadvantaged or advantaged throughout their educational journey. This includes those who will eventually enrol in post-secondary and who will not. Extending the OEN to include demographic data would help track and identify barriers from the K-12 stage up until post-secondary and post-graduation. When students consent to provide such information, they should do so willingly and without fear of repercussions. The provincial government should collect self-identified data regarding access to post-secondary education on all relevant grounds under the Ontario Human Rights Code and adopt data privacy principles as stated in the Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism. These protection measures should be implemented holistically and cover the general protection of data for all students. A standardized approach helps build trust amongst students and ensures consistency. Such a system would enable relevant stakeholders to identify and address issues more proactively and in a fair manner.

CENTRALIZATION & PUBLICATION OF DATA

Principle: Data should be widely available, securely collected and inform the enhancement of policy intervention within Ontario's post-secondary education system.

Principle: Measuring the success of Ontario's post-secondary education system and the prescription of further policy efforts should be linked to measurement of longitudinal access metrics.

Concern: Current student access data is fragmented and not presented in a single location, remaining inaccessible for sector stakeholders and fails to effectively action government policy in a way that equitably supports students' experience.

Concern: Marginalized students are disproportionately impacted by the lack of regulation and privacy around third-party platforms when collecting extensive student data.

Concern: Insufficient-proactive consultation on diverse student concerns across Ontario's primary and secondary education system, fails to adequately inform government policy that supports students' experience in the post-secondary sector.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should contract the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to research access to the post-secondary system and publish this data regularly.

Recommendation: The provincial government should establish guidelines for post-secondary institutions to abide by when entering into an agreement with third-party platforms.

¹⁹⁴ Karen Robson, "Ontario School Boards Require Clearer Guidance to Collect Student Census Data," *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*, July 13, 2023, <https://heqco.ca/ontario-school-boards-require-clearer-guidance-to-collect-student-census-data/>

¹⁹⁵ Ken Chatoor, Rachel Courts, Jennifer Han, Victoria Barclay, and Julia Colyar, *Access Programs in Ontario: OPAIP and Pathways to Education* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2022), <https://heqco.ca/pub/access-programs-in-ontario-opaip-and-pathways-to-education/>

¹⁹⁶ Karen Robson, "Ontario School Boards Require Clearer Guidance to Collect Student Census Data," *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*, July 13, 2023, <https://heqco.ca/ontario-school-boards-require-clearer-guidance-to-collect-student-census-data/>

Recommendation: The provincial government should annually consult with primary, secondary, and post-secondary student advocacy groups on the centralization and dissemination of data related to student access and success.

Ontario's post-secondary education system cannot equitably serve its students without knowing who it serves, who is missing, and what barriers persist over time. Despite public dialogue around equity in education, the province lacks an up-to-date, centralized, and comprehensive data system that tracks students' access data into, through, and beyond post-secondary education – particularly for equity-deserving groups. The data that is available is limited, outdated, and fragmented across institutions and Ministries. For instance, while Ontario has implemented the Ontario Education Number (OEN) as a mechanism to track student progress from early years into post-secondary, this infrastructure does not fully connect data across the K–12, college, university, apprenticeship, and private career college sectors.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, the federal Youth in Transition Survey, the most robust longitudinal data set on youth transitions into post-secondary education, has not been updated since 2010.¹⁹⁸ This leaves a 15-year data void during which post-secondary enrolments have increased, but so too have disparities in access and completion. Disaggregated data by race, income, disability, Indigeneity, immigration status, and gender is particularly lacking in Ontario. As HEQCO notes, “the lack of access to data disaggregated by equity groupings undermines the ability to understand and address barriers faced by marginalized populations.”¹⁹⁹ Without these metrics, institutions and policymakers are left with an incomplete picture; one that cannot account for the intersecting challenges faced by students at the margins.

Understanding access to post-secondary education for underrepresented groups requires framing access not merely as a function of entry” but also retention and success which requires longitudinal measurement and data collection. Without this lens, well-intentioned policies may fall short or exacerbate inequities. Therefore, MCURES should contract the HEQCO to research access to the post-secondary system and publish this data regularly. HEQCO is legislatively mandated to conduct research on access, quality, and accountability in Ontario's post-secondary system. Contracting HEQCO to publish access metrics on an annual basis would ensure consistent methodology, credibility, and public accountability. HEQCO already completes a similar task through their provincially-mandated responsibility on reporting about freedom of speech policies at post-secondary institutions. Moreover, a HEQCO-led data initiative could integrate equity-based metrics – including first-generation status, Indigeneity, racial identity, orientation, disability, etc. – into routine reporting. This is critical for both government and institutions seeking to align with Ontario's equity and inclusion goals.

Students and sector stakeholders have repeatedly called for better data to drive equitable policy. Ontario's post-secondary sector needs improved data infrastructure to inform policies that address barriers faced by underrepresented groups, as current structures often ask students to speak on their experiences without the support of meaningful or recent data – emphasizing the need for data to match the dialogue. However, ongoing chronic underfunding of the post-secondary sector threatens the quality of education and support services, making longitudinal data on access and outcomes even more critical to ensure resources are allocated effectively and equitably. Other leaders in post-secondary research, like HEQCO, have echoed this with researchers and institutional leaders alike emphasizing that the absence of common indicators undermines cross-sector learning and impedes effective intervention design.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Kelly Gallagher-Mackay, Data Infrastructure for Studying Equity of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario (Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario), 2017, <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FINAL-Data-Infrastructure.pdf>

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Ontario's post-secondary institutions are increasingly reliant on third-party digital platforms to deliver core academic, administrative, and support services. Learning management systems, proctoring software, student service applications, and even AI-driven academic tools now underpin significant aspects of the student experience. A 2021 national survey by the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CDLRA) found that over 70 percent of Ontario's post-secondary institutions expanded their use of digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic – a trend that has largely continued post-pandemic; yet, fewer than half reported having institution-wide frameworks in place to assess these tools for equity or accessibility prior to implementation.²⁰¹ However, in the absence of provincial oversight, this reliance has exposed serious gaps in student data privacy, accessibility, and equity, especially for marginalized learners. At present, institutions operate with highly variable standards when negotiating with third-party vendors, resulting in inconsistent practices around consent, transparency, and data stewardship. Without guidelines for sharing and standardizing third-party data, valuable insights into the access and success trajectories of equity-deserving groups remain siloed, proprietary, or lost entirely. As well, students have raised alarms about the collection and storage of sensitive information, including academic performance, biometric data, personal information, geographic location, and even mental health disclosures. For example, remote proctoring tools that use facial recognition have been found to function less accurately for students with darker skin tones, raising serious equity concerns around algorithmic bias and the integrity of academic evaluation.²⁰² Disabled students have likewise reported systemic barriers when third-party tools are inaccessible or fail to accommodate individual learning needs, often without a clear appeals process.²⁰³ Therefore, the provincial government should establish guidelines for post-secondary institutions to abide by when entering into an agreement with third-party platforms. The lack of cohesive, government-mandated guidelines not only jeopardizes student protection but also limits the ability to leverage data from these platforms in a way that contributes to equitable access policy.

Currently, the absence of standardized, inclusive consultation results in access policies that are reactive, inconsistent, and often disconnected from the root causes of underrepresentation. By embedding student consultation into the data lifecycle, Ontario can move beyond tokenistic engagement and build a more transparent, equitable post-secondary system; one where students do not just contribute anecdotes but shape the evidence that guides systemic change. With that, the provincial government should annually consult with primary, secondary, and post-secondary student advocacy groups on the centralization and dissemination of data related to student access and success. Annual consultations led by the Ministry – spanning primary, secondary, and post-secondary sectors – would include student voices in a way that is structured, consistent, and reflective of the province's demographic diversity. These consultations should directly inform data collection methodologies, performance metrics, and research agendas for the Ministry and for adjacent advocacy bodies (HEQCO). They would also empower student organizations to contribute meaningfully to data governance and ensure that access and success indicators reflect evolving realities on the ground.

²⁰¹ Nicole Johnson, "Tracking the Impacts of the Pandemic on Digital Learning in Ontario," Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, 2021, https://cdlra-acrfi.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021_ontario-report_en.pdf

²⁰² Smith, Joy & Browne, Tamika. Algorithmic Injustice: A Report on Bias in AI-Powered Proctoring Software in Canadian Higher Education. Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021

²⁰³ Students for Barrier-Free Access, 2022

POLICY STATEMENT

Whereas: All willing and qualified students should have equitable access to post-secondary education in a safe and inclusive environment with supports and programs that respect their diverse identities and experiences.

Whereas: Students from underrepresented groups should have equitable opportunities to navigate and access the diverse pathways within the post-secondary system.

Whereas: Students from underrepresented groups should be supported in navigating intersecting and compounding systemic barriers that may impact their access into post-secondary education.

Whereas: Opportunities for self-advocacy and access to social support groups can contribute to better experiences for students with disabilities but are not substitutes for disability-inclusive practices and environments.

Whereas: Equitable, accessible, and inclusive access to post-secondary education for students with disabilities, enhances possible employment and career outcomes.

Whereas: Invisible disabilities should be better recognized in accommodations processes and adequate resources should be dedicated to fulfilling them.

Whereas: Students with disabilities should have fair and equitable access to post-secondary education, including support and accommodations tailored to their specific needs.

Whereas: Racialized students should feel safe in their communities and have student experiences free from the disproportionate harms of systemic racism, discrimination, and reinforced stereotypes to their student experience.

Whereas: Racialized students should feel represented and supported with the necessary resources and guidance to make informed decisions in the pursuit of their preferred education and career pathways.

Whereas: Racialized students should feel represented and supported with the necessary resources and guidance to make informed decisions to pursue their preferred education and career pathways.

Whereas: Post-secondary institutions should be encouraged to foster diverse and inclusive communities that reflect the identities of Indigenous students.

Whereas: Students should have access to course content, supports and resources in their preferred Indigenous language.

Whereas: Indigenous students should have equitable access to post-secondary education, regardless of their previous educational pathway, with tailored supports upon entrance.

Whereas: Indigenous students should have equitable access to post-secondary education and experiences free from systematic oppression, colonization, and discrimination.

Whereas: Post-secondary institutions must deliver Indigenous-specific educational and support programs.

Whereas: Students of lower socioeconomic status should receive a higher proportion of grants to loans than high-income students, when accessing post-secondary education.

Whereas: Students of lower socioeconomic status should feel empowered to pursue their preferred post-secondary pathway free from financial or systemic barriers.

Whereas: Rural and northern students should have the same quality of primary and secondary education, as well as the same ease of access to outreach and support programs.

Whereas: Rural, northern and Indigenous communities should be consulted to ensure meaningful dialogue about the unique barriers to access post-secondary education.

Whereas: Students should have access to materials, supports and resources in their preferred language.

Whereas: Students deserve to feel represented and experience diversity in the communities where they access post-secondary education.

Whereas: Funding criteria for post-secondary programs should ensure and incentivize equitable and consistent funding for all students and programs.

Whereas: Performance-based funding should serve as an incentive for post-secondary institutions to actively enhance access for underrepresented student groups.

Whereas: Performance-based funding metrics must fully account for the unique challenges and barriers that marginalized student populations may face in accessing and completing post-secondary.

Whereas: Existing Pre-Degree Programs should be accessible and organized in a central manner, for students to consider when accessing post-secondary education.

Whereas: Pre-degree programs improve student outcomes, by increasing their ability to qualify for post-secondary education.

Whereas: Mature students should receive support in their efforts to continue their education and lifelong learning. As many are also parents, guardians, or caregivers, their responsibilities should not create additional barriers to accessing education.

Whereas: Mature students should not be forced into part-time student status unwillingly in order to financially or otherwise support and provide for themselves and/or dependent(s).

Whereas: There should be a clear and consistent definition of mature student used by OSAP and the Ministry of University and Colleges to maintain clear and consistent funding guidelines and for clarity in future research.

Whereas: Mature students often bear intersectional identities with additional or compounding barriers that should be considered by supports offered by the provincial government and post-secondary institutions when collecting data and implementing initiatives.

Whereas: Students should be able to transfer between post-secondary institutions without facing excessive financial costs or academic penalties.

Whereas: Students should have early, easily accessible and understandable information about transferring between post-secondary institutions.

Whereas: Students should be able to transfer between post-secondary institutions with awareness of both potential academic setbacks and benefits.

Whereas: Information about outreach programs, such as program outcomes, eligibility, associated costs or fees, and application processes, should be easily accessible and understandable.

Whereas: Outreach programs should introduce students to post-secondary education early, exposing them to new opportunities and fostering their development and interest in further education.

Whereas: All students regardless of their background should have an equitable opportunity to access post-secondary education.

Whereas: Prospective students should have clear, accessible information on diverse educational pathways.

Whereas: Outreach efforts must highlight non-traditional and culturally relevant options to post-secondary education.

Whereas: Early financial investment into a long-term education savings plan can help prospective students pursue post-secondary education.

Whereas: Students and their support systems should be able to access financial literacy programs to better understand financial aid systems and encourage pursuit of their desired post-secondary pathway.

Whereas: Students should be able to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education without undue pressure that imposes academic limitations on their actions.

Whereas: Schools undergoing de-streaming should have adequate staff and resources to train educators on changes and to meet students' academic needs with appropriate learning supports.

Whereas: Educational staff should refrain from influencing students with their biases towards specific streams and post-secondary pathways.

Whereas: The Grade 10 Career Studies course is a crucial opportunity to inform and educate students about pursuing post-secondary education and should be used to fill students' gaps in knowledge.

Whereas: School administration, guidance counsellors and support staff, should foster an environment where students are able to learn, thrive, and plan for their future.

Whereas: Guidance counsellors are a valuable resource for breaking down informational barriers in regard to all possible post-secondary education choices, including part-time studies and pre-degree programs.

Whereas: BIPOC staff can positively impact school climates and promote academic success, by providing representative and culturally informed supports for marginalized students.

Whereas: Mental health services should be integrated into academic support structures to ensure students can succeed without barriers caused by mental health struggles.

Whereas: Every student should have an equitable opportunity to achieve academic success and complete pre-bachelor education.

Whereas: Success and retention in post-secondary education is correlated to success in pre-bachelor education.

Whereas: All willing and qualified students should have access to extracurriculars.

Whereas: Extracurriculars often encourage students' interest and success in post-secondary education and help develop students' career and education goals.

Whereas: Public policy interventions that focus on improving access to post-secondary institutions should rely on comprehensive data.

Whereas: Ontario's data on post-secondary quality and accessibility should be easily accessible, transparent, and informative toward the enhancement of government policy impacting the post-secondary sector.

Whereas: Data collection and research-instrument design should identify inequities faced by marginalized groups and measure progress in removing these barriers.

Whereas: Data should be widely available, securely collected and inform the enhancement of policy intervention within Ontario's post-secondary education system.

Whereas: Measuring the success of Ontario's post-secondary education system and the prescription of further policy efforts should be linked to measurement of longitudinal access metrics.

Be it resolved that: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should require post-secondary institutions to develop and report on enrollment and outreach strategies for underrepresented groups to inform equity-based funding for Strategic Mandate Agreements.

Be it further resolved that (BIFRT): The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should expand the current OSAP bursary programs for underrepresented students that aims to cover the cost of preparatory prerequisites.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should re-evaluate needs-based means testing and repayment plans for provincial financial aid programs to equitably value financial challenges and systemic barriers faced by underrepresented students.

BIFRT: The provincial government should meaningfully consult with underrepresented students to refine existing policies and increase resources to fund and supports programs that enable students to select their preferred post-secondary pathway.

BIFRT: The provincial government should promote databases and programs through the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) portal for families and students when aspiring to access post-secondary education.

BIFRT: The provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions offer targeted scholarships towards underrepresented students through earmarked envelope funding.

BIFRT: The provincial government should modify the existing OSAP funding structure to reimburse students seeking diagnosis regardless of diagnostic results.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide appreciable funding to the Facilities Renewal Program for the implementation of repairs and modifications of physical infrastructure to meet the accessibility needs of students.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide additional grant funding to implement accessible physical infrastructure modifying existing physical infrastructure to meet students' accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide additional grant funding to support initiatives that aim to modify academic processes to meet student accessibility needs at post-secondary institutions.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop a system for evaluating and verifying accessibility supports at individual post-secondary institutions and present this information in a central location.

BIFRT: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to review the effectiveness of programming and support for students with disabilities to ensure academic skill development is a focus.

BIFRT: The provincial government should incentivize the implementation of transition programs between primary, secondary education, and post-secondary education to support students with disabilities.

BIFRT: The provincial government should mandate post-secondary institutions to publish standardized, easily accessible guides outlining all available accommodations.

BIFRT: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to publish best practices guidelines on student accommodations to help students know when institutions are providing accommodations and to better support students' self-advocacy.

BIFRT: The provincial government should assemble an advisory committee of diverse racialized students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community leaders to consult on representation of racialized students and educational outcomes at the post-secondary level.

BIFRT: The provincial government should create a special purpose grant that would support institutions to sustain courses and programs that enable academic pursuit and dialogue around justice, reconciliation and humanity.

BIFRT: The provincial government should amend section 20 (8) of the MTCU Act to mandate institutional collection and publication of disaggregated race-based data every three years.

BIFRT: The provincial government should implement mandatory, recurring, and culturally relevant, anti-Indigenous racism and cultural sensitivity training for non-Indigenous educators, administrators, and counsellors.

BIFRT: The provincial government should increase and provide long term funding to support increased Indigenous representation in leadership and staff roles at post-secondary institutions.

BIFRT: The provincial government should mandate post-secondary institutions to ensure a continued high education by replacing vacant and retiring Indigenous education positions with equally qualified successors.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should collaborate with the federal government to implement the TRC Calls to Action by using the proposed government strategies, specifically focusing on Calls 14 and 15, to increase the accessibility of post-secondary education resources in Indigenous languages.

BIFRT: The provincial government should invest in Indigenous centered post-secondary education outreach programs during secondary education, both on- and off-reserve, to increase students' ability to attend their preferred post-secondary education pathway.

BIFRT: The provincial government should fund post-secondary bridging programs that are developed by Indigenous communities and educators that incorporate cultural and academic transition supports.

BIFRT: The provincial government and post-secondary institutions should collaborate with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to provide a culturally inclusive environment for hiring, retaining and ensuring the succession of Indigenous staff, enhancing classroom representation and developing decolonial pedagogies for Indigenous course content and programs.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop comprehensive and accessible outreach resources outlining the financial supports available to Indigenous post-secondary students in Indigenous languages.

BIFRT: The provincial government should fund and mandate enhanced training for guidance counsellors on pathways to post-secondary education for Indigenous students, through the Ministry of Education.

BIFRT: The provincial government should invest in targeted enrichment programs which aim to build lifelong learning skills for students with lower socioeconomic status, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education.

BIFRT: The provincial government should increase funding for outreach groups to provide resources, programs and services for elementary and secondary schools in neighbourhoods with an increased lower socioeconomic population, promoting access to avenues and understanding opportunities of post-secondary education.

BIFRT: The provincial government should re-establish the Geographic Circumstances Grant to expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund to provide targeted financial support and travel subsidies for students to access the Ontario Universities' fair in the nearest region.

BIFRT: The provincial government should actively collaborate with rural and northern community organizations, and local Indigenous governments ensuring adequate consultation on local needs as well as addressing unique barriers for rural and northern students in accessing post-secondary education.

BIFRT: The provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure that students are appropriately prioritized in the federal government's investment in internet access.

BIFRT: The provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel, from their place of permanent residence to their preferred institution offering their program of choice.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide envelope funding to support the provision of support services and courses in French and Indigenous languages.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should provide grant funding to expand student services in French for students accessing rural and northern bilingual post-secondary institutions.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide grant funding to rural and northern community organizations for programming targeting the inclusion of underrepresented groups.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should expand upon the Enrolment Strategy section of the next iteration of Strategic Mandate Agreements with a focus on increasing and incentivizing equitable access.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should add a metric to performance-based funding based on the volume and breadth of student support programs specifically aimed at supporting students from underrepresented groups.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should strategically distribute funds to institutions which set and meet ambitious and meaningful student access targets through their Strategic Mandate Agreements.

BIFRT: The provincial government should revise the weighting of the metrics in Strategic Mandate Agreements to ensure they do not disadvantage students from marginalized groups, including placing less emphasis on graduate earnings and employment.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should work in collaboration with the Ontario College Application Service to conduct up to date research and data collection on the success of pre-degree programs and the outcomes of students completing such programs.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, in collaboration with institutions currently offering foundational programs, should mandate minimum standards and expectations that pre-degree programs should achieve.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should increase public awareness on the availability of pre-degree programs as an alternate pathway to post-secondary education, in a centralized and accessible manner, helping future students and secondary school educators to remain informed of all their educational options.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should increase current OSAP funding by creating grants for students with dependents to subsidize the cost of care, to supplement the Federal Bursary for Students with Dependents.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should amend OSAP to reduce the percentage of courses needed to be considered full-time for mature students to 40 percent of a full course load.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Government and Consumer Services should incentivize businesses, through a tax break, to assist mature student employees in continuing their education.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should redefine independent students within OSAP to match both federal student aid guidelines and language commonly used by postsecondary institutions.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should conduct recent research and create materials and training for post-secondary institutions to better support the needs of Mature Students.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should develop a grant, through the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), for lower socioeconomic transfer students to waive their cost of transfer fees.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should mandate that Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) allow transfer students to pay a per-program-basis application fee, removing the current baseline cost for students, so students seeking to transfer, are not expected to pay for costs beyond the application fee(s) for the program(s) they aspire to transfer to.

BIFRT: The provincial government should track student transfer programs and release anonymized information to institutions to help better inform university outreach and programming.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should promote the standardization of more basic and general courses offerings to facilitate the accrediting of previously passed courses for incoming transfer students as a step towards standardizing transfer credit processes to achieve a provincial post-secondary transfer credit guide.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should develop a fund and distinct institutional responsibilities, that allows for the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) and post-secondary institutions to allocate resources to increase advertisement of transfer opportunities.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should, in consultation with experts such as ONCAT and advocacy groups, work/collaborate to identify gaps in the transfer credit system and supports needed by transfer students.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should develop outreach programs aimed at building knowledge around university transfer protocols, expectations, and supports, and invest in targeted outreach for said programs to underrepresented groups utilizing data collected from relevant consultations.

BIFRT: The provincial government should work with the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security to promote targeted outreach programs aimed at people who do not have their high school diploma or GED but wish to pursue further education.

BIFRT: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), with collecting data on long-term outcomes of outreach programs, focusing on effectiveness, graduation rates, retention, and barriers faced by participants, to inform future improvements and policies.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop an online portal for all outreach programs that provides in-depth, accessible information on the available programs.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop grant funding for schools to visit post-secondary institutions on field trips.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop a grant for universities to create and enhance existing outreach programs that provide opportunities to meet post-secondary requirements.

BIFRT: The Ministry of College and Universities should renew funding to account for inflation each year for the Ontario Post-Secondary Access and Inclusion Program (OPAIP) to allow post-secondary institutions to continue to use it to deliver enhanced outreach programs for students.

BIFRT: The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), in publishing best practice guidelines for post-secondary institutions' outreach initiatives, ensuring those initiatives support students and applicants' informed decision making on post-secondary pathways.

BIFRT: The provincial government should work with the federal government to allow for retroactive contributions to the RESP program, for those born prior to 2024.

BIFRT: The provincial government should invest in informational programs and campaigns for financial aid and existing scholarship databases to prospective students and their support systems.

BIFRT: The provincial government should, in consultation with third-party education organizations, develop a free online financial literacy course focused on saving for and understanding post-secondary education financing and loan payment.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should extend de-streamed compulsory courses to grade 10 and all grade 9 courses, and ensure schools are adequately supported in the de-streaming process.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should mandate and support school boards that continue to offer streamed grade 10 courses in developing a strategic plan to provide grade nine students and their families with clear, accessible information on the distinction between academic and applied streams and their corresponding post-secondary pathways.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education, through advisory groups, should consult with educational staff, students and their families to understand a holistic view of school needs to create implementation policies and guidelines regarding streaming and switching streams.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should review current curriculum for de-streamed grade nine core courses to ensure equal synthesis between academic and applied streams, with opportunities for additional learning.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should 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 10 Career Studies curriculum.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should extend Career Studies curriculum beyond Grade 10 and amend it to educate students about the outcomes of streaming decisions, in order to inform their decisions on post-secondary options and employment opportunities.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses with detailed guidelines explaining various post-secondary pathways, and the viable employment opportunities that each pathway could lead to.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses to ensure that the financial literacy skills needed to navigate post-secondary financial systems are taught.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should amend the curriculum for career courses with detailed guidelines on how to establish co-ops, shadowing opportunities, summer jobs and internships to explore various career paths.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should regularly update guidance resources to encompass the diverse post-secondary pathways in Ontario to ensure guidance counselors remain informed and unbiased on the varying ways to attain a higher education.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should 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.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should study guidance counsellors- to- student ration and provide funding to increase staffing and on-on-one support time.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should mandate and incorporate cultural sensitivity and anti-racism classroom supports for administrators, guidance counselors, and support staff into their strategic plan to ensure that all students are provided with an equitable and high-quality secondary education experience.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should assess and address recruitment board biases and design pathways to facilitate licensing of educators from underrepresented groups to address the need for more support staff, and the lack of diversity in school staff.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should commission research on the retention rates of BIPOC educational staff, the systemic barriers impeding on BIPOC staff retention, and the growing need for BIPOC educational staff in rural and northern communities

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should provide grant funding for school boards to hire and recruit BIPOC educational staff according to local school and community needs.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should consult with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to fund and regulate their proposed mental health and well-being teams based on student population.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should provide grant funding for school boards to provide structured programming for students facing suspensions.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should mandate the meaningful collection and promotion of race-based data surrounding suspensions and expulsions.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should provide envelope funding to school boards to hire teaching staff to develop in-school financially accessible tutoring centres in secondary schools.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should provide increased funding for the expansion of mentorship and support programs in order to permit a wider reach to underrepresented populations.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education's Learning Recovery Action Plan should include specific actions to combat those who were disproportionately impacted by the shift to an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BIFRT: The provincial government should continue to invest in the Broadband Access for All Students Initiative as well as the expansion of broadband in public libraries in underserved communities.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should create a consolidated grant for technology within the Grants for Student Needs to help purchase, maintain, and repair digital tools for secondary students.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should fund needs-based scholarships and stipends for students to engage in extracurriculars.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Education should develop a grant that aims to provide schools and relevant community organizations with the required funding to run a broad array of affordable and accessible extra-curricular programs, as well as the associated supplies.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop grant funding for post-secondary institutions to provide enrichment programming for k-12 students.

BIFRT: The provincial government should make students aware of the data being collected throughout their education and continuously ask for consent throughout the data collection process.

BIFRT: 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.

BIFRT: The expert panel referred to in the previous recommendation should be tasked with creating a framework for a common university reporting standard for demographic data on student applications, offers, acceptances, retention, and success.

BIFRT: The provincial government should collect self-identified data regarding access to post-secondary education on all relevant protected grounds under the Ontario Human Rights Code and adopt data privacy principles stated in the Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism.

BIFRT: The provincial government, upon the advice of the expert panel should establish robust metrics for access that should be tracked on both a recurring and longitudinal basis at both the institutional and provincial levels.

BIFRT: The provincial government should amend the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to include, from consenting individuals, important demographic information necessary to further the goals of a comprehensive access strategy.

BIFRT: The provincial government should extend aspects of the Ontario Education Number (OEN) registry to post-secondary students, to monitor access trends, alongside implementing a privacy policy for the protection of student demographic data.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide funding for HEQCO, in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and their community organizations, to develop community research partnerships in constituencies to track diverse student pathways unique to socio-geographic environments of institutions, while respecting student anonymity.

BIFRT: The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security should contract the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to research access to the post-secondary system and publish this data regularly.

BIFRT: The provincial government should establish guidelines for post-secondary institutions to abide by when entering into an agreement with third-party platforms.

BIFRT: The provincial government should annually consult with primary, secondary, and post-secondary student advocacy groups on the centralization and dissemination of data related to student access and success.