

# A COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS STRATEGY

All willing and qualified students should be able to pursue higher education in Ontario, yet some groups remain significantly underrepresented within the province's post-secondary sector. The hidden costs of university life – housing, transit, and food security – continue to disproportionately affect students from marginalized communities, especially those balancing work, caregiving responsibilities, or navigating familial skepticism about certain post-secondary pathways. To meaningfully enhance access, the provincial government should create a comprehensive access strategy that is bold, intersectional, and equity-driven in both design and implementation, consisting of flexible pathways to university, improved outreach programs, increased guidance in secondary schools, and more comprehensive data regarding access initiatives and post-secondary attainment.

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## OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

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

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APRIL 2025

## 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.

# THE PROBLEM

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 & AWARENESS

Students are concerned about how students who do not have their high school diploma or 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 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. 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 & 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.



## 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 Securityties 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, the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Securityties should expand the current OSAP bursary programs for underrepresented students that aim to cover the cost of preparatory prerequisites. Students also recommend that 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.

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 the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security 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 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. Additionally, 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.

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 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. Additionally, 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.

Students also recommend that 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.

OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security 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 the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security 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, 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.

Students recommend that 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. 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 the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security 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, 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.

## IMPROVED OUTREACH & AWARENESS

To improve outreach and awareness, 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. 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, the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security 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 & 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 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. 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.