



# EDUCATED INVESTMENTS

SAFEGUARDING THE  
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

## OUSAA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

2017 BUDGET SUBMISSION

# ABOUT OUSA

*OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight institutions across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, 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.*

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# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

## CENTRALIZING DATA

The government should convene an expert panel to examine and make recommendations regarding the collection, availability, and accessibility of post-secondary data in Ontario as they relate to access to university, the university experience, and post-university outcomes.

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## PREVENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The province should create a Sexual Violence Prevention Unit within the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development.

The Ministry of the Attorney General and the Alcohol and Gaming Commission should embed appropriate sexual violence prevention training into the Smart Serve Responsible Alcohol Beverage Service Training Program.

## ADVANCING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Provide an option for employers to receive up-front subsidies when hiring co-op students as an alternative to the Cooperative Education Tax Credits.

Create a Work-Integrated Learning Institutional Grant that provides funding to institutions to pursue the proliferation of WIL opportunities based on their specific need and circumstances.

The government should act on the advice from the Premier's Expert Panel on the Highly Skilled Workforce to create a partner's table.

## SUPPORTING STUDENT SERVICES

Maintain envelopes to fund essential student supports across the board and ensure a minimum standard of service exists across all campuses.

The government should reallocate \$12 million from the discontinued Mental Health Innovation Fund (MHIF) towards system-wide initiatives aimed at improving front-line mental health care capacity.

# INTRODUCTION

A modern and robust university sector is critical to achieving Ontario's ambitions for creating the highly skilled workforce needed to face the challenges of the future. The World Economic Forum has said that we are in the "fourth industrial revolution," and an oft-cited report by the Miner and Miner consultants group predicts that in the next 15 years the number of Canadian jobs requiring a higher education credential will be approximately 77%, and even higher for newly created jobs. To that end, it seems clear that strategic direction - and strategic investment - in higher education is critical to growing the economy and encouraging the kind of job readiness that the province will need.

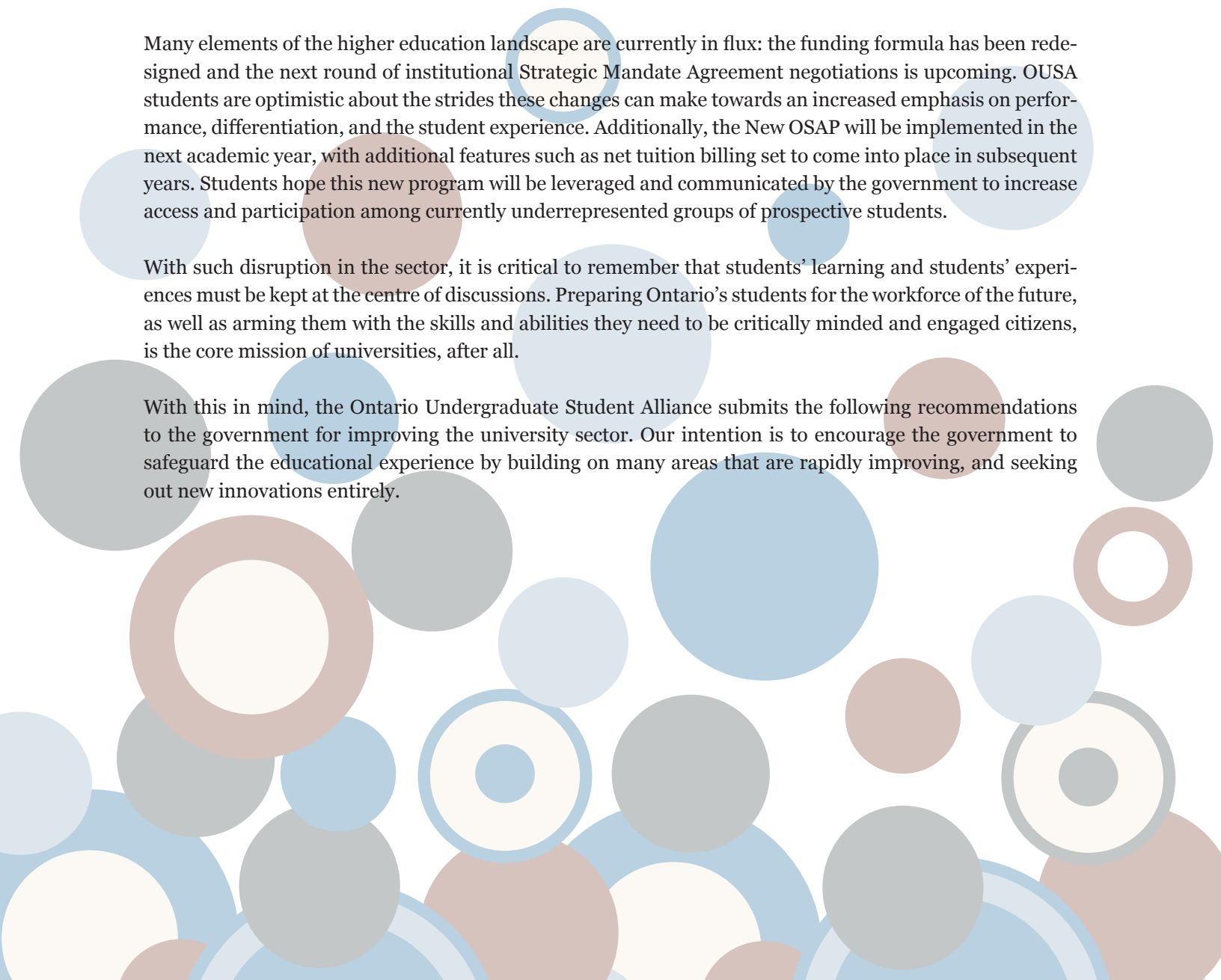
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We have already begun to see critical reforms take shape. Last year, after working closely with students, the government announced a complete redesign of student financial assistance. The New OSAP will restructure grants and tax credits into a system that makes tuition effectively free for many of the prospective students with the greatest need and substantially reduces the need to accrue debt for many more, ultimately improving post-secondary access and persistence.

Many elements of the higher education landscape are currently in flux: the funding formula has been redesigned and the next round of institutional Strategic Mandate Agreement negotiations is upcoming. OUSA students are optimistic about the strides these changes can make towards an increased emphasis on performance, differentiation, and the student experience. Additionally, the New OSAP will be implemented in the next academic year, with additional features such as net tuition billing set to come into place in subsequent years. Students hope this new program will be leveraged and communicated by the government to increase access and participation among currently underrepresented groups of prospective students.

With such disruption in the sector, it is critical to remember that students' learning and students' experiences must be kept at the centre of discussions. Preparing Ontario's students for the workforce of the future, as well as arming them with the skills and abilities they need to be critically minded and engaged citizens, is the core mission of universities, after all.

With this in mind, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance submits the following recommendations to the government for improving the university sector. Our intention is to encourage the government to safeguard the educational experience by building on many areas that are rapidly improving, and seeking out new innovations entirely.



# CENTRALIZING DATA

Choosing to attend university, and which university to attend, is one of the biggest decisions a person can make. While financial barriers are prohibitive for some, and ongoing financial hardships can affect students' ability to persist and graduate, many non-financial factors are critical in these deliberations as well. Evidence suggests that the greatest predictor of post-secondary attainment is whether or not one's parents received a post-secondary credential.<sup>1,2</sup> Without a parent to provide guidance and insight, the value, expectations, and challenges of attending university can be difficult to overcome.

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Access to information is important for overcoming informational barriers and unanswered questions about hidden costs, living arrangements, program expectations, services and supports, and employment outcomes. This is why OUSA believes this data should exist in a centralized, accessible location.



The government should convene an expert panel to examine and make recommendations regarding the collection, availability, and accessibility of post-secondary data in Ontario as they relate to access to university, the university experience, and post-university outcomes.

Cost: \$0

The ultimate goal of such a panel would be to provide recommendations for the government to pursue the measures outlined in Bill 76, The Pathways to Postsecondary Excellence Act. Introduced by MPP Yvan Baker on November 28, 2016, this bill calls for the collection and centralized publication of important, program-by-program information related to accessing university, succeeding in university, and transitioning into the workforce or further studies after university. This information should include, but not be limited to:

- Admission requirements;
- Costs, including ancillary costs and program materials;
- Financial aid;
- Class sizes;
- Student demographics;
- Student satisfaction with indicators related to quality and service availability;
- Graduate satisfaction with the overall educational experience;
- Graduate employment and educational status, including location, sector, or further studies;
- Average annual compensation of graduates;
- Average government-issued student debt of graduates by program of study;
- OSAP loan default rates; and
- Employer satisfaction with graduates.

There are several bodies that could be responsible for this, or a new one could be created. We believe the government should, through consultation with all relevant actors and stakeholders, determine where and how this can best be implemented.

Similar to the expert panel on the Highly Skilled Workforce, the panel should be comprised of experts in data collection and university information, and should consult thoroughly with all relevant stakeholders, including students. Its aim should be to provide a comprehensive view of the status of postsecondary data - specifically completeness, consistency, and accessibility - and provide recommendations for where and how it could be centralized and published for broad public use.

Adopting this recommendation would align with the digital and information focused approach that have already set by this government by establishing a Minister Responsible for Digital Government. Having basic information about the post-secondary education system available in a central location in an accessible and digital manner would increase transparency in the sector while also being useful to students, parents, and policymakers alike.

# PREVENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In March 2016, the Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act, was given royal assent. This legislation held a schedule pertaining specifically to Ontario's universities and colleges, marking the government's commitment to ensuring that all campuses are safe and free from sexual violence. This was a monumental step in what must be an ongoing effort.

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Everyone must play a role in creating a world free of sexual violence. The alternative is accepting its existence as an inevitable part of our society. All survivors should be supported in ways that allow them to seek meaningful justice and safely pursue their education. Student associations have played a critical role on campus, providing programming, training, and peer support and will continue to offer recommendations as a blueprint for success.

Regardless of where students attend university, they should have the confidence that their institution is safe, and that their institution is following evidence-based best practices in preventing sexual violence. While many universities are taking this opportunity to foster positive change on their campuses, the inconsistency of campus responses needs to be addressed.

The province should create a Sexual Violence Prevention Unit within the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development.

Cost: \$2 million to \$4 million

The government of Ontario should take on a greater stewardship role through this new unit to ensure consistent, high-quality, and evidence based programs are implemented across the sector. This would be a great stride towards ensuring that students—no matter where they attend university—feel safe, and towards providing forward-focused stewardship in monitoring sexual violence prevention programs. This unit should provide quality assurance, oversight, and develop best practices for institutions' training and education programs, keeping in mind the varying levels of staff and faculty interaction with students.



The government could use this unit to reduce redundancies and increase efficiencies in the system. While one size may not fit all institutions, best practices do exist and evidence can be used to identify effective activities at any campus.<sup>3</sup> It is OUSA's vision that the new Sexual Violence Prevention Unit would have four main responsibilities:

- 1) Identify effective, evidence-based prevention programs;
- 2) Identify best practice models for universities;
- 3) Form, administer, interpret, and report on Climate Survey findings; and,
- 4) Identify and eliminate barriers to individual paths to healing on campus.

The Ministry should staff this unit by hiring experts with knowledge in the following fields:

- 1) Research methodology;
- 1) Data collection and analysis;
- 1) Survey administration;
- 1) Sexual violence and gender studies; and,
- 1) Program Evaluators with a Credentialed Evaluator (CE) designation.

These experts would ensure that prevention programs are of high-quality and based on evidence. This is necessary because when done poorly, some programs perpetuate rape myths and could in fact increase rates of sexual violence perpetration.<sup>4</sup>

The Sexual Violence Prevention Unit would function as a permanent unit within the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. The unit should engage with stakeholders—such as people who have experienced sexual violence, educators, students, administrators, and disciplinary experts—to understand the needs of post-secondary institutions and all those who would be affected by intervention programs.

**The Ministry of the Attorney General and the Alcohol and Gaming Commission should embed appropriate sexual violence prevention training into the Smart Serve Responsible Alcohol Beverage Service Training Program.**

**Cost: \$0**

Education and training is very important to combating sexual violence on campuses. However, OUSA believes that training should be tailored to the unique needs and responsibilities of the various roles in an institution's community. One specific measure the province can take to provide specific and targeted training to campus employees who work in high-risk situations would be to focus on bar staff.

While we would like to see this step taken to empower and enable bystanders to respond to, manage, and ultimately reduce incidents of sexual violence at campus bars, a potential outcome of this would be the replication of such results more broadly across the province.

OUSA believes that all members of the university community should receive bystander intervention training. It is also important to have position specific training delivered to those working in high-risk situations. Research shows that alcohol increases the likelihood of sexual assault perpetration in men who are already predisposed to committing sexual violence.<sup>5</sup>

10 / Including a module with regards to sexual violence prevention in Smart Serve would be a relatively simple addition to an existing program and would provide a minimum level of training for employees working in high-risk environments.

We would caution that including training in Smart Serve should not deter campus bars—and other bars across Ontario—from providing additional in-person bystander intervention training. Face-to-face training offers the best opportunity to approach sensitive topics and practice the skills learned.<sup>6</sup> They also have higher completion rates than online trainings.<sup>7</sup> While blended learning models—that are designed with integrated online and offline components—take advantage of the benefits of both approaches to training, it may not be feasible to re-envision and re-structure a program delivered on the same scale as Smart Serve in this way. Another limitation of Smart Serve certification is that it does not expire. It must be acknowledged that one-time training is not enough. However, this could be solved by requiring re-certification after a certain period of time. Not only would this keep the information fresh for those working in bar environments, but this would also give the opportunity for new research and information to be conveyed to those previously certified.



# ADVANCING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a skills-focused subset of a broader approach to education called experiential learning. HEQCO describes WIL as “activities that intentionally integrate learning within an academic institution with practical application in a workplace setting, relevant to a student’s program of study or career goals.”<sup>8</sup> OUSA students further support the caveat added by Bill 64 - considered in October 2016 by the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs - that meaningful WIL must include an institutionally-guided component of critical reflection of the experience.

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Students undertaking WIL have the opportunity to apply their learning to real world scenarios, and gain a greater understanding of what they have learned. Co-op placements and internships are the most obvious forms of WIL, but other opportunities exist, such as undergraduate research projects or capstone projects.

These opportunities have many benefits that supplement a student’s post-secondary education: higher graduation rates, higher rates of mentorship from faculty and professional contacts, and better employment outcomes.<sup>9</sup> In a study examining the hopefulness of post-secondary students, students cited having professional role models, feeling skilled, having passion, and having opportunities as contributing to their optimism about their future.<sup>10</sup> Experiential learning opportunities are able to promote these contributing factors by connecting students with potential mentors and providing them with opportunities to develop their professional skills.

OUSA’s survey of its membership has found similar enthusiasm for WIL. In a 2015 survey of 10,000 undergraduate students, 84% of those who had participated in some form of WIL said it improved their educational experience, while only 2% said it had detracted from it. Moreover, according to data released by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, participation in WIL leads to greater employment rates, greater rates of full-time employment, and higher earnings.

In the same vein, a 2016 survey conducted by Abacus Data found that students’ satisfaction with their educational experience rose sharply with increased WIL participation: from 75% (no WIL), to 87% (some WIL), to 97% (a lot of WIL). Further, 89% of current students and recent grads would support increased WIL opportunities in postsecondary programs.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the Cooperative Education Tax Credits, provide an option for employers to receive up-front subsidies when hiring co-op students.

Cost: Up to \$3,000 per eligible employer

Increasing the number of WIL opportunities across Ontario’s 20 publicly assisted universities is no simple task. The number of students in post-secondary education is daunting enough, let alone the differences across institutions: some institutions are large, others are small. Some are in populous urban centres, surrounded by industry and large employment hubs, others are in remote areas or smaller population centres.

To entice the different kinds and sizes of employers that will be necessary to provide a broad range of experiences to students at numerous, diverse institutions the incentives offered to them must be appropriately flexible and responsive. OUSA recommends, therefore, that the government build on the success of the Co-operative Education Tax Credits (CETC).

The CETC is a refundable tax credit that allows employers to recoup up to \$3,000 of the costs for hiring co-op students. According to a report from the Canadian Association for Cooperative Education, the program saw the number of employers using the program grow from 1,730 to 2,320 between 2009 and 2012, and eligible co-op hires increase from 9,360 to 16,710.<sup>12</sup>

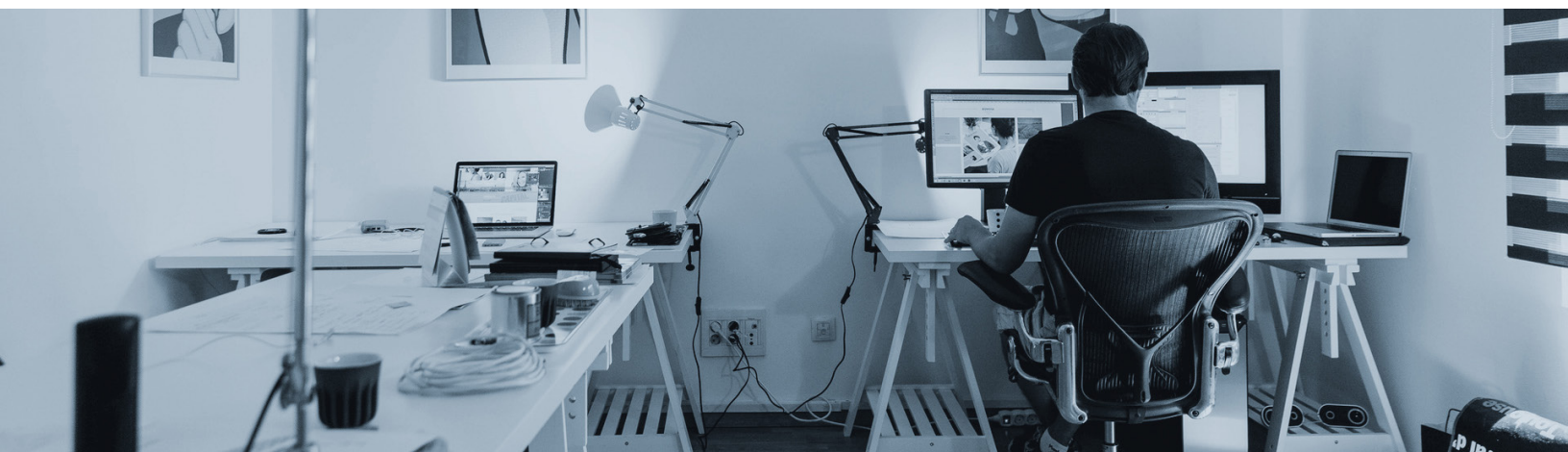
Tax credits are excellent motivators for large employers, such as those currently involved in the bulk of WIL experiences, however smaller organizations may find up-front assistance a more useful incentive. OUSA therefore recommends that small and medium sized enterprises be provided the option to receive the value of the tax credit - up to \$3,000 per eligible work term - as an up-front subsidy.

Research has revealed employers' frustration with the practical challenges of bringing on students for WIL opportunities, namely the difficulty of budgeting for a short-term worker.<sup>13</sup> A system of grants for employers would be more effective at immediately compensating employers and encouraging better uptake of co-op students.

Create a Work-Integrated Learning Institutional Grant that provides funding to institutions to pursue the proliferation of WIL opportunities based on their specific need and circumstances.

Cost: Up to \$5 million

To accommodate the diversity of institutions, the experiences offered through WIL will have to be varied in and of themselves. Not every student wants a co-op placement or internship, and not every institution is situated to provide them. Opportunities for applied research, high impact case studies, and other potential formats will have to be included in the province's WIL efforts, and to do that, many different kinds of employers and industries will need to be recruited.



Creating more responsive and flexible incentives on the employer side is just one avenue to explore when facilitating the growth of WIL opportunities. Universities will face their own challenges as well, and these barriers will not be the same at every one. It is difficult, therefore, to envision a broad, overarching policy that will be equally appropriate or effective at each institution in furthering the WIL agenda.

13 / Recognizing the different needs and situations of Ontario's universities – some of which will already have strong WIL foundations, while others will be relatively new to it – OUSA recommends the government create an institutional grant that allows universities to pursue a broad range of projects towards pre-defined goals in the service of promoting WIL.

This Work-Integrated Learning Institutional Grant (WILIG) could model the Credit Transfer Institutional Grant, which provides \$5M-6M per year in funding to universities to pursue increasing student mobility. Funding eligibility for the WILIG would be determined through the submission of proposals for initiatives pursuing pre-defined goals and established “eligible activities.” For example, the goals of the fund could be to increase the number of WIL opportunities available for students, to improve communication and support for students interested in WIL, or to conduct studies related to creating new kinds of WIL experiences or testing the quality and effectiveness of WIL programs. Eligible activities could include hiring personnel and funding communication strategies.

If the province is to achieve its goals surrounding WIL, funding towards this end will be necessary. Many work-integrated learning offices are currently paid for by ancillary fees. If the province moves towards universal WIL opportunities, embedding the practice in curriculum, then WIL participation will become tuition-related and will require a new source of resources; compulsory tuition-related activities cannot be funded by student fees, as established by the ancillary fee protocol.

The government should act on the advice provided by the Premier's Expert Panel on the Highly Skilled Workforce to create a partner's table.

Cost: \$0

The Highly Skilled Workforce report calls for a Planning and Partnership Table to be struck, bringing together students, employers, labour, universities, K-12 educators, and other elements of civil society to discuss and generate recommendations for preparing the workforce of the future.

OUSA believes that collaboration and communication between these actors is critical for increasing the kinds and quantities of WIL experiences available for students. Significant buy-in will be required from all stakeholders, so a formal, institutionalized body with a clear mandate, as suggested in the report, will significantly enhance the province's ability to progress on this front.

# SUPPORTING STUDENT SERVICES

Universities across Ontario are diverse in terms of structure, organization, and focus. Though universities operate in different ways, and while their overarching autonomy must be respected, there are core areas of support that should be present at each.

Student supports exist on campuses because they provide essential resources for persistence, achievement, and wellness. In the academic arena, for example, universities with thorough, effective advising have students who are statistically more likely to persist and graduate.<sup>14</sup> Further, many students need additional support to succeed in universities, and some students who are members of underrepresented and minority groups may require higher levels of support when they work their way through the post-secondary education system.<sup>15</sup> Health, counseling, and disability services are universal, but other essential supports such as Indigenous and other equity services often vary in scope and reach.

Maintain envelopes to fund essential student supports across the board and ensure a minimum standard of service exists across all campuses.

As the province adopts a new funding formula, and focuses on furthering the agenda of differentiation through the next round of Strategic Mandate Agreements, students will be supportive of increasing the financial levers attached to issues of performance and specialization.

A 2016 report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario identified “equity of access” and “learning journey” as potential defining characteristics of universities in a typology, based on differences that already exist between institutions. These characteristics include the inclusiveness of admissions, student satisfaction, and favourable student-teacher ratios.



OUSA believes that universities which are currently leaders in these areas should continued to be recognized as such, and that through the new SMAs, the funding formula should allow them to be funded for excellence in these respects. However, differentiation should not mean that other institutions who are not specializing in these areas are absolved of responsibility to provide consistent, high-quality service in critical areas, such as: Indigenous student services, career services, international student centres, offices for students with disabilities, academic advising, and mental health services.

15 / Students recognize the need for high quality support services at every campus. In fact, in a 2015 survey of OUSA member students, 20% of respondents rated support services as one of the areas most needful of improvement on their campuses.<sup>16</sup> A different survey notes that Ontario students are often disappointed with the low levels of support in some areas.<sup>17</sup>

To that end, a special purpose grant should be created to ensure a consistent, across the board standard for essential student services.

The government should reallocate \$12 million from the discontinued Mental Health Innovation Fund (MHIF) towards system-wide initiatives aimed at improving front-line mental health care capacity.  
Cost: \$0 (cost neutral)

With the Mental Health Innovation Fund ceasing after many successful years of funding project-based initiatives, including an extension of the fund itself, the government should transfer these resources towards system-wide improvements in order to continue supporting this clear priority.

The majority of lifetime mental disorders have their first occurrences by the typical postsecondary age of 18-24.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, young adults aged 15-24 are more likely to report mood disorders or dependency issues than any other age group.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, data from the last two iterations of the National College Health Assessment

Table 1: Prevalence of disabilities among university students

Condition	2013	2016
Psychiatric condition	5.8%	7.6%
ADHD	4.6%	5.6%
Chronic illness	4.4%	4.9%
Learning disability	4.1%	5.6%
Partial sightedness or blindness	2.5%	2.2%
Other disability	2.1%	3.1%
Deafness or hearing loss	1.8%	1.9%
Mobility or dexterity disability	1.0%	1.1%
Speech or language disorder	0.9%	1.1%

suggest that the prevalence and severity of student mental health concerns have escalated at Ontario post-secondary institutions, likely due to increased participation of students with mental health issues.

Given students’ particular vulnerability to mental health issues, there are significant demands for mental health care and counselling services on university campuses.

Funding mental health initiatives through dedicated envelopes would provide institutions with additional resources that would alleviate some of the dependence on student fees for funding these services, and afford them sufficient freedom to pursue solutions that work best for their campuses and students. At the same time this strategy realizes broader government objectives around addressing systemic issues related to mental health.

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OUSA recommends that front-line care be prioritized when investing in mental health. Not only does front-line care allow for earlier interventions, which is an especially effective way to support mental health, but also provides the greatest potential for direct impact for students.

For the purposes of setting a funding envelope for front-line care, it is important to have a comprehensive definition of frontline care that includes:

- Psychologists, counsellors, mental health nurses, and other direct practitioners;
- Campaigns that promote student mental health and resilience;
- Workshops aimed at enhancing coping and stress management skills;
- Mental health training initiatives for professors, students, and other university employees who are in direct contact with the student population; and
- Aboriginal counsellors, international student support staff, disability support staff, LGBTQ+ student supports, and other support workers who may not be classified as mental health workers but who often provide mental health services.



# CONCLUSION

Students believe that a modern and robust university sector is critical to Ontario and while the 2016 Budget made great strides towards a more affordable and accessible post-secondary system with the changes to OSAP, we need to ensure the quality of education and experience of students is high.

The publication and centralization of post-secondary data will enable smart, evidence based decisions, by policy makers and students alike.

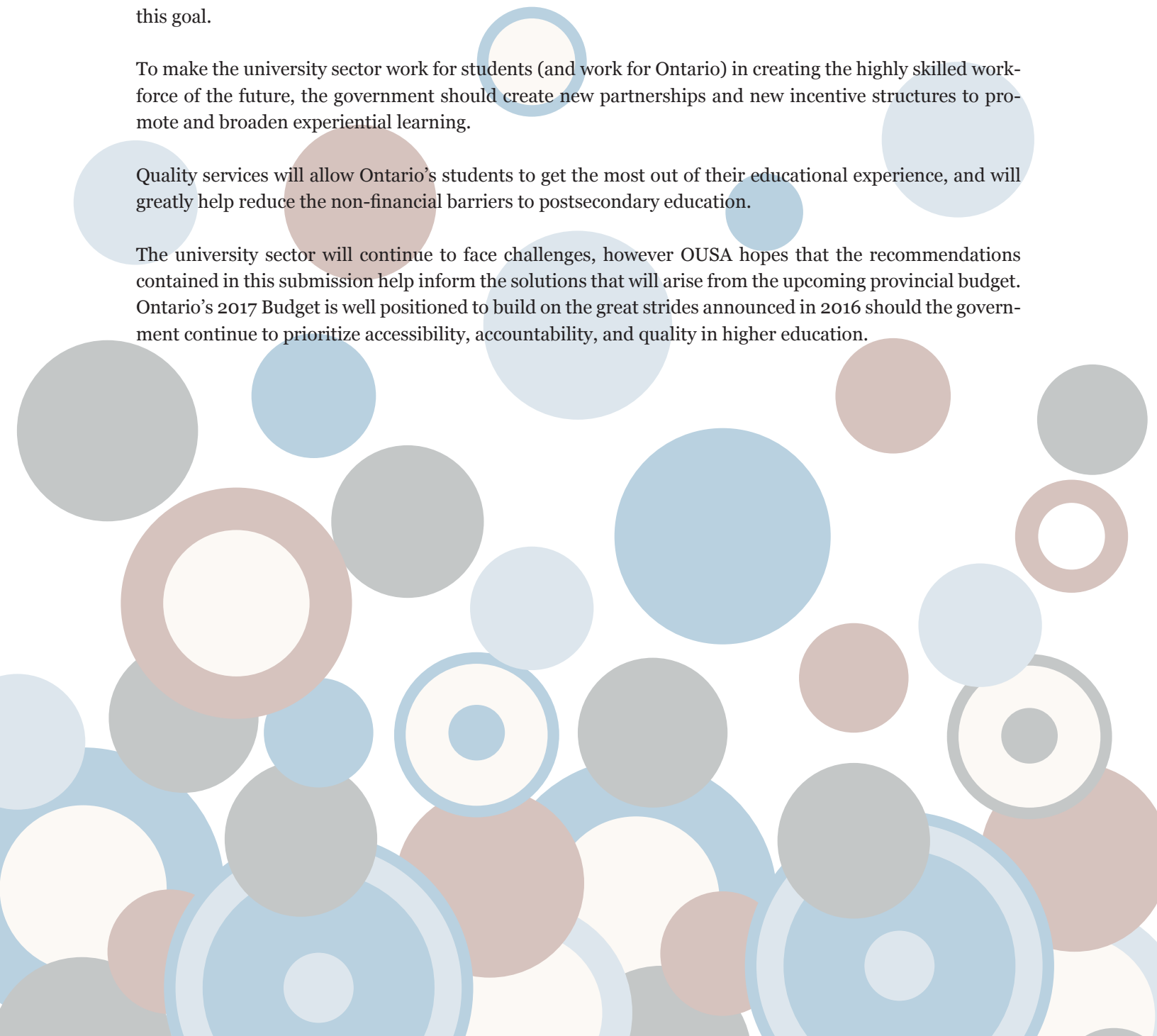
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Taking further steps to making campuses free from sexual violence by creating a new Sexual Violence Prevention Unit in the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development offers a tangible step towards this goal.

To make the university sector work for students (and work for Ontario) in creating the highly skilled workforce of the future, the government should create new partnerships and new incentive structures to promote and broaden experiential learning.

Quality services will allow Ontario's students to get the most out of their educational experience, and will greatly help reduce the non-financial barriers to postsecondary education.

The university sector will continue to face challenges, however OUSA hopes that the recommendations contained in this submission help inform the solutions that will arise from the upcoming provincial budget. Ontario's 2017 Budget is well positioned to build on the great strides announced in 2016 should the government continue to prioritize accessibility, accountability, and quality in higher education.



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