



AFFORDABILITY

RESULTS FROM THE 2015 ONTARIO POST-SECONDARY
STUDENT SURVEY

OU^{SA}

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

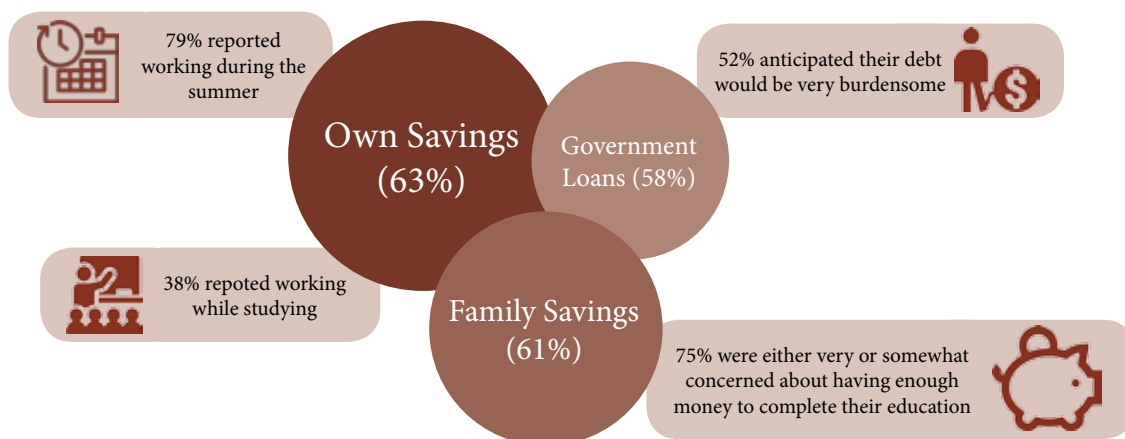
As an advocate for many of Ontario's university students, OUSA prides itself on keeping their voices at the forefront of discussions about systemic change. To this end we survey our membership to ensure that we have the best possible information about their experiences, and can make recommendations for improvements. This report is one in a three part series that presents the results from the 2015 Ontario Post-secondary Student Survey. The discussion herein will assist our organization in determining students' use of financial assistance, employment earnings, and other sources of income that are used to pay for post-secondary education.

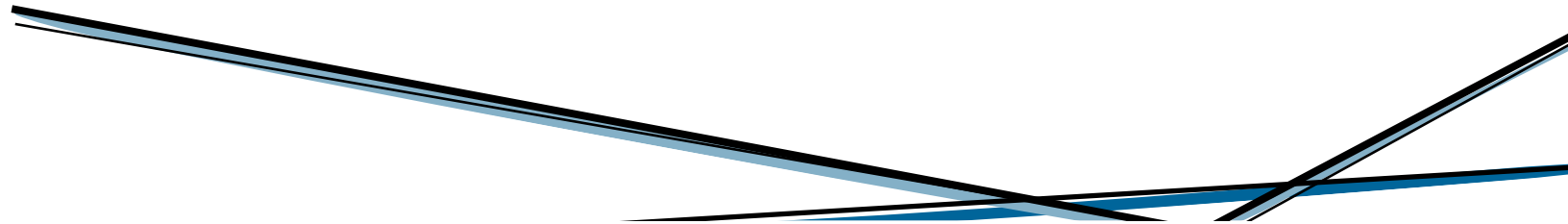
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In November 2015, over 10,000 individuals anonymously participated in the 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey from six of OUSA's eight member student associations. From these participants we gathered 9,197 complete responses from undergraduate students. The vast majority of respondents were domestic students: 91 percent identified themselves as Canadian citizens and another three percent identified as permanent residents. Five percent of the sample indicated they were international students in Canada on a visa.

Affordability was, by far, respondents' primary policy concern. Tuition and ancillary fees were selected by 51 percent of all domestic and international respondents and financial assistance was selected by 47 percent of all respondents as in need of the most improvement. Most students reported using their own savings (63 percent) and their family's savings (61 percent) to pay for their educational costs in the 2015-16 academic year. Government loans were the third most common source of funds for educational costs, used by 58 percent of respondents. Other common sources of financial assistance were awards, scholarships, or bursaries provided by universities and Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs).

Of the approximately 40 percent of respondents who did not report using government loans, 82 percent said they did not apply. The most common reasons for not applying for government loans were: presuming they would not qualify, not needing financial assistance, and not wanting any debt. When respondents who applied for bank loans were asked why they chose to borrow money from a bank, rather than or in addition to the government, almost half of them said they needed to supplement what they would receive from the government. The next most common reasons were not qualifying for government loans, as well as thinking they would not qualify for government loans, or needing money faster than they could get it from government.





Three-quarters of respondents said that they were either very concerned or somewhat concerned about having enough money to complete their education. Students with dependants, who were married, or reported having a disability were slightly more concerned than their counterparts about having enough money to finish their education. However, parental income had the strongest effect on respondents' concerns about having enough money to finish, such that lower parental income was associated with increased levels of concern. A little over half of respondents (52 percent) anticipated their debt would be very burdensome after they graduate.

The most common reason our respondents chose to work during the summer was the need to earn money in order to continue going to school, followed by the desire to earn disposable income to spend during the school year. The vast majority of respondents (79 percent) reported working during the summer prior to taking the survey, with most of those working full-time for their entire summer break. Just 45 percent of respondents who worked during the summer were earning minimum wage; the other 55 percent were earning an average of \$16 per hour. Many respondents (56 percent) indicated that they would have worked more hours in the summer if they had been able to find the work.

Much fewer respondents (38 percent) reported working while studying; those who did reported working part-time while taking classes. Exactly half said they earned minimum wage and the other half earned an average of \$16 per hour. Working while studying was perceived to have a negative effect on 44 percent of respondents' academic performance, but 39 percent said that their in-study employment had no effect on their academic performance.

Generally, our respondents were using safer financial sources: the money they borrow from family is loaned interest-free, the government offers flexible repayment assistance options, and sizable proportions of our students had access to accrued savings or investments. Unfortunately no single source provided enough funding to exceed the costs of tuition and books on its own. Students and their families appear to be taking on greater financial burdens, suggested by the large group of respondents feeling concerned that they would not have enough money to finish their degrees.

Results show definitively that the government loan system is losing users due to misinformation. Although a minority of students reported using bank loans, they used this source because of the perceived inadequacy of government sources (though this may change in the 2017-2018 academic year, as New OSAP reforms are implemented and advertised). Perhaps most concerning, our results suggest that an undergraduate education may be especially unaffordable for part-time students. They are underrepresented among government loan users, RESP users, and university award users. In addition they may take longer to complete their credentials because of competing financial priorities as a result of being married, a mature student, or having dependants.

Going forward, the government should focus its policy efforts on improving assistance programs for specific student groups. Students with low family incomes are already anticipating several updates to OSAP. Next, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should look to improve the program for students with dependants, married students, and part-time students.

INTRODUCTION

All willing and qualified students in Ontario should be able to access and excel within the post-secondary education system. To achieve this, decision makers and influencers need reliable evidence to describe the successes and failures of the system's current arrangement.

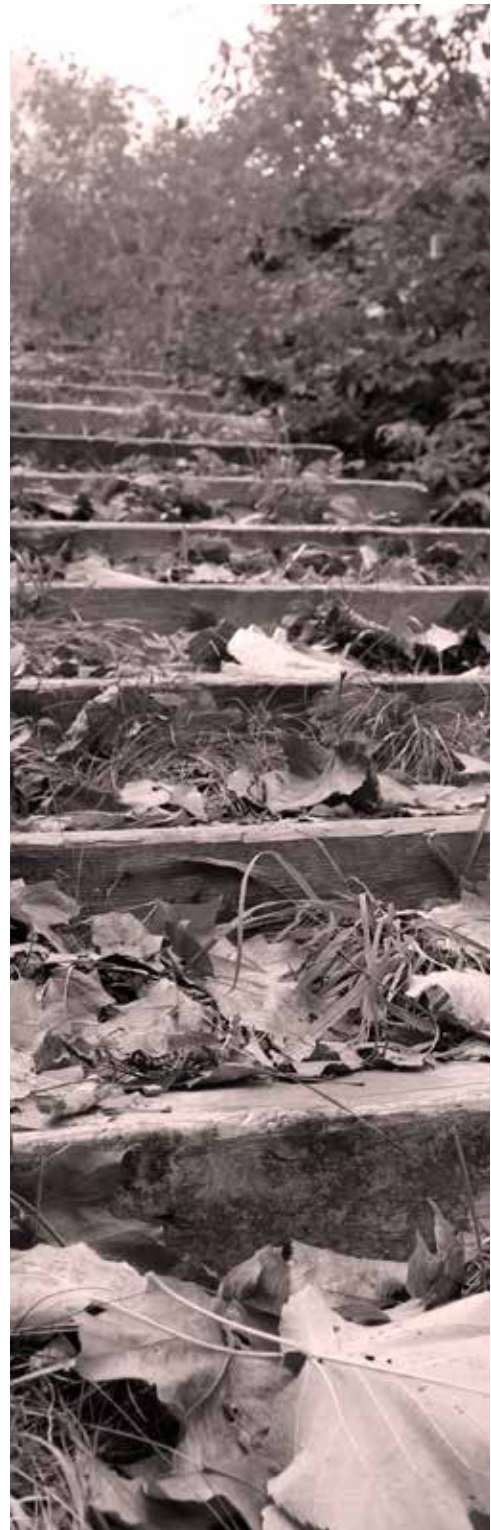
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This survey comes out of an initial national collaboration in 2009 when a multi-institutional survey was conducted to engage the entire student body and share their opinions of post-secondary education. The end goal of this previous project was to provide data to national and provincial, student and government leaders to help inform their decisions on improving higher education in Canada.

This current project is unique in its focus on undergraduate students in Ontario and is representative of the voices that make up the OUSA membership.

Results from the 2015 Ontario Post-secondary Student Survey will assist our organization in determining students' use of financial assistance, employment earnings, and other sources of income that are used to pay for post-secondary education. This is a crucial component for OUSA's policy research in that it provides accurate, up-to-date information on our members' attitudes and behaviours with respect to the affordability of higher education. Results will be used to inform advocacy efforts and policy development over the next two years, until the next administration of the next survey.

Maintaining the affordability of post-secondary education is a collective responsibility that improves the equity of access to university as well as the province's long-term economic prosperity. The student financial assistance system should be considered an essential part of Ontario's social safety net and must also be recognized for its immense complexity. In this report, several different facets of financial assistance will be explored: private contributions from students and their families, government aid, private lenders, and awards. This research looks at the ways that each of these components impact students' access to monetary resources to cover the entirety of their education-related costs.



Students and their families should neither be absolved of their responsibilities to contribute to their educational costs nor unduly burdened by these costs. OUSA members are concerned about the ability of government aid to meet students' financial needs. Our members feel they should not be forced to take on part-time employment at the expense of their academic success, nor should they have to use lines of credit, bank loans, and credit cards when their government assistance is insufficient. On this former point, the use of private lenders often means students must opt-out of debt remission and repayment assistance programs, while opting-in to repaying the money they borrow while they are studying.

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At the time this survey was administered, several inconsistencies existed within the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) that limited its eligibility criteria, assessment of costs and financial need, the flexibility of repayment options, and its interaction with institutional financial aid. It is important to OUSA members that the public financial aid system meets the needs of those with the greatest financial burdens first. Unfortunately, part-time students are ineligible for much of the provincial aid provided through the Canada-Ontario Integrated Student Loan (delivered through OSAP). More unfortunate still, spousal contributions for married students artificially decrease their financial need and across the system, education and living costs are systematically underestimated.

With these concerns in mind, this report will discuss the combination of financial aid sources used by OUSA members and will consider: which students use financial assistance and how much they receive; the adequacy of the assistance they receive; and the impact of employment on their financial and academic standing. In service of these queries, the report will describe the methodology and limitations of the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey before presenting the survey's results pertaining to survey participation, use of financial assistance, and engagement in employment.



METHODOLOGY

Six of OUSA's eight member student associations were surveyed in November 2015 (Brock, Laurier, McMaster, Trent-Durham, Waterloo, and Queen's). Our application to the Non-medical Research Ethics Board at Western University was not approved due to institutional restrictions on the use of student email addresses; unfortunately these students were not invited to participate. Laurentian University's Student General Assembly was not a member at the time of administering the survey.

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The survey questionnaire was 118 questions long, although not all respondents were asked every question. The questionnaire was uploaded onto a secure online web platform hosted by CCI Research Inc. Once the organization received ethics approval, invitations to participate in the survey were sent to students' university emails. Each invitation contained a link to the survey and was mailed from our member student associations. If students decided to take part in the survey, they were directed to a detailed letter of information that explained the risks and benefits of participating as well as the steps taken to keep respondents' identities private and their responses confidential.

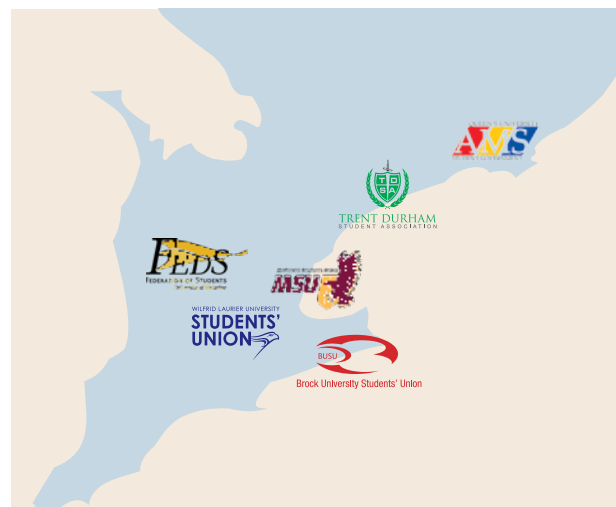
Responses were only recorded after students clicked "submit" at the end of the survey. Respondents could skip any question or invalidate their responses by exiting their browser at any time. All surveys were completed anonymously and participation was entirely voluntary.

Upon completing the survey, participants were invited to enter a draw for a chance to win one of two iPad Mini 3 tablets. All voluntarily submitted email addresses were stored separately from survey responses to maintain respondents' anonymity. OUSA never had access to students' email addresses.

Survey participants were recruited using a non-random sampling method so, prior to data analysis, all data were weighted by institutional enrolment to provide a more accurate representation of the OUSA membership at large. In addition to observing differences in descriptive statistics, statistical testing was used to compare means and certain variables' independence from one another. These data analysis techniques helped reveal meaningful patterns in the dataset.

LIMITATIONS

As previously stated, the survey was administered to only six of OUSA's current eight member schools. Unfortunately, the results cannot be generalized to the students attending schools who were unable to participate. Western is the largest OUSA member school so its exclusion from the dataset restricts the sampling frame opening results to selection bias. Another limitation lies in the nature of self-reported data. As with any survey, OUSA must rely on respondents to be honest, truthful, and forthcoming in their responses. Finally, not all students responded to every question, which means less insight is provided in certain areas.



Despite these limitations, the data still hold validity and are useful for providing insight into the student experience. The sample is not made up of a homogenous group of respondents, evidenced by the significant numbers of students from varying backgrounds and demographics who participated. The survey included several screening and demographic questions to allow for more targeted analyses based on institution, year of study, program of study, identification as having a disability, identification as an Indigenous student, mature student status, full-time status, part-time status, parental education, and parental income. Background information regarding the type of neighbourhood respondents grew up in was also explored to see if differences were found among students who grew up in rural, Northern, or urban communities or on First Nations Reserves. The responses to these questions suggest widespread coverage of the membership. Responses have also been weighted so as to prevent misinterpretations in the data analysis.

RESULTS

SURVEY PARTICIPATION

Over 10,000 individuals participated in the 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey. From these participants we gathered 9,197 complete responses from undergraduate students (surveys were considered complete if the respondent answered at least 30 percent of the questions they were asked). About 225 respondents were disqualified when they indicated they were working towards a Master’s or Doctorate degree.

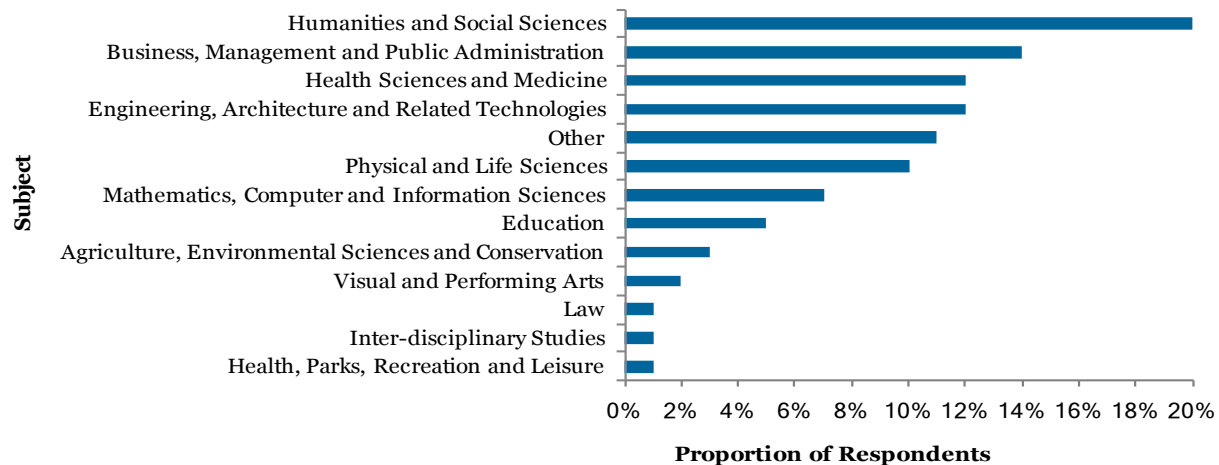
Results were weighted by institutional enrolment to ensure they would be representative of OUSA’s membership. Weighted participation results are listed in table 1 below by institution. All further results are weighted.

Table 1: Weighted survey participation by OUSA member school.

Institution	Weighted Count	Weighted Proportion
University of Waterloo	1778	29%
McMaster University	1405	23%
Queen’s University	1192	19%
Brock University	858	14%
Wilfrid Laurier University	851	14%
Trent University Durham	51	1%
Total	6134	100%

Survey participation was relatively even across academic years of study: 23 percent of respondents were in their first year, 24 percent were in their second year, 25 percent were in their third, and 22 percent were in their fourth year. Very few students (six percent) were in their fifth (or higher) year of study.

Figure 1: Survey participation by field of study, n = 6,132.

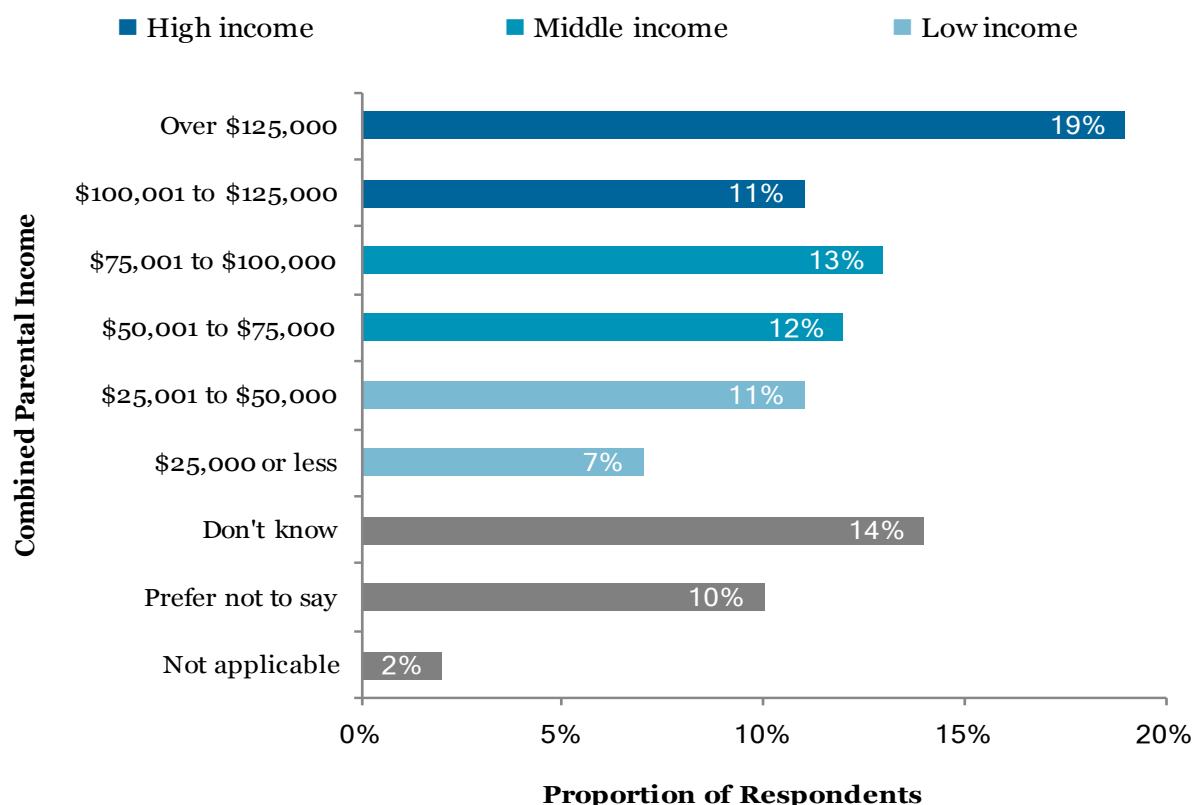


As shown in figure 1, the majority of respondents were studying Humanities or Social Sciences, however this only represents 20 percent of the sample. The next most common areas of study were Business, Management and Public Administration (14 percent), Health Sciences and Medicine (12 percent), and Engineering, Architecture, and Related Technologies (12 percent). The vast majority of respondents were completing their Bachelor's degrees (92 percent), but very small minorities were working towards an undergraduate certificate or diploma (3 percent) or a professional degree in medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, law, or optometry (one percent). Almost all respondents (96 percent) were enrolled full-time with the remaining 4 percent enrolled part-time.

The vast majority of respondents were domestic students: 91 percent identified themselves as Canadian citizens and another three percent identified as permanent residents. Five percent of the sample indicated they were international students in Canada on a visa. Just 12 respondents declined to disclose their immigration status. Almost half of the international student respondents (47 percent) said they were living in China when they applied to study in Canada. The next most common location was Nigeria, indicated by 5 percent of respondents. When asked about first language, a third of respondents said Chinese, about a quarter said English, and about a fifth said Mandarin.



Figure 2: Survey participation by parental income; n = 5,345.



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Although a slight majority of respondents reported their parents or guardians earned over \$125,000 per year, as shown in figure 2, the distribution of respondents across parental income groups was almost even. The figure also groups the income categories provided in the survey into three groups: low, middle, and high-income families. Parental income was moderately associated with citizenship and immigration status. Respondents in the lowest income categories—combined parental income was less than \$25,000 or \$25,001 to \$50,000—were most likely to identify as permanent residents or international students and less likely to identify as Canadian citizens. Students in the middle and high-income categories—combined parental income upwards of \$50,001—were most likely to identify as Canadian citizens. Interestingly, international students were most likely to not know or prefer not to disclose their parents’ income; permanent residents were more likely to report that their parents’ income was not applicable, $\chi^2(24) = 285.06$, $p < 0.001$, $\Phi = 0.23$.

STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Affordability was, by far, respondents’ primary policy concern. Tuition and ancillary fees were most often indicated as in need of the most improvement, selected by 51 percent of all domestic and international respondents. Financial assistance was the second most selected item in need of improvement—selected by 47 percent of all respondents. Three-quarters of respondents said that they were either very concerned or somewhat concerned about having enough money to complete their education. A little over half of respondents (52 percent) anticipated their debt to be very burdensome after they graduate.

Funding Sources

Most students in our sample reported using their own savings (63 percent) and their family's savings (61 percent) to pay for their educational costs in the 2015-16 academic year. Narrowly, government loans were the third most common source of funds for educational costs, reportedly used by 58 percent of respondents. As far as private contributions go (that is, contributions made from sources within respondents' families), just 10 percent of respondents reported using funds that their family borrowed through a loan or line of credit.

Of the 71 percent of students reporting using money from their family to pay for school, about a quarter told us this money was a loan. Respondents borrowed an average of \$5,400 and most said their family loaned them this money interest-free. The bulk of students who received monetary gifts from family received \$5,981 on average.

While government loans were the most commonly used form of financial assistance (financial sources excluding private contributions made personally or by family) used in the 2015-16 academic year; awards, scholarships, or bursaries provided by universities followed with 42 percent of respondents. Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs) were used by 38 percent of respondents. Other forms of financial assistance are listed in table 2.

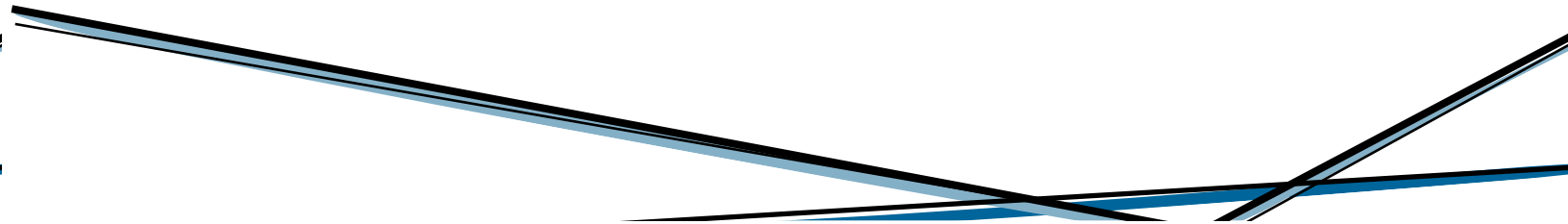
Table 2: Sources of financial assistance used by 2015 OPSSS respondents.

Source	Proportion of Respondents	Average Recieved
Government loans	58%	\$7,337
Awards, scholarships, and bursaries from university	42%	\$2,304
Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP)	38%	\$5,642
Awards, scholarships, and bursaries from third-party	16%	\$2,537
Bank loans	10%	\$15,894
Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)	1%	\$9,159

While relatively few students reported using bank loans, this source averaged the highest amount—about \$15,800—used in a single school year. Next, the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) provided about \$9,100 on average for the few First Nations students who reported using it. Government loans, comparatively, seemed to provide a modest yearly amount (about \$7,300 on average) to borrowers.

Most respondents reported cumulative debt from government loans (55 percent), family loans (19 percent), and credit cards (15 percent). On average, students reported about \$17,800 in cumulative government loan debt, about \$12,100 in cumulative family loan debt, and about \$2,300 in cumulative credit card debt. Slightly more than a third of respondents reported having no debt related to their educational costs.

A minority of international student respondents—15 percent—reported receiving loans, scholarships, or grants from a government or organization in their home country to help pay for their education. On average, they reported receiving about \$30,900 in loans and about \$9,900 in grants. Among these respondents, a third reported that their funding requires them to return home after they graduate.



About 60 percent of respondents who indicated they were international students said they found their tuition fees to be predictable from year to year. While the results are split fairly evenly, a slightly larger proportion (51 percent) of international student respondents said they did not have difficulty affording their tuition. A mere 6 percent of our international respondents reported “financial reasons” as influencing their decision to leave Canada once they graduate.

Borrower Behaviour

Differences in the use of government loans were found among full-time and part-time students, where just 38 percent of part-time respondents reported using this source compared to 55 percent of full-time respondents. Also, fewer married students seemed to use government loans (44 percent) when compared to non-married students (55 percent).

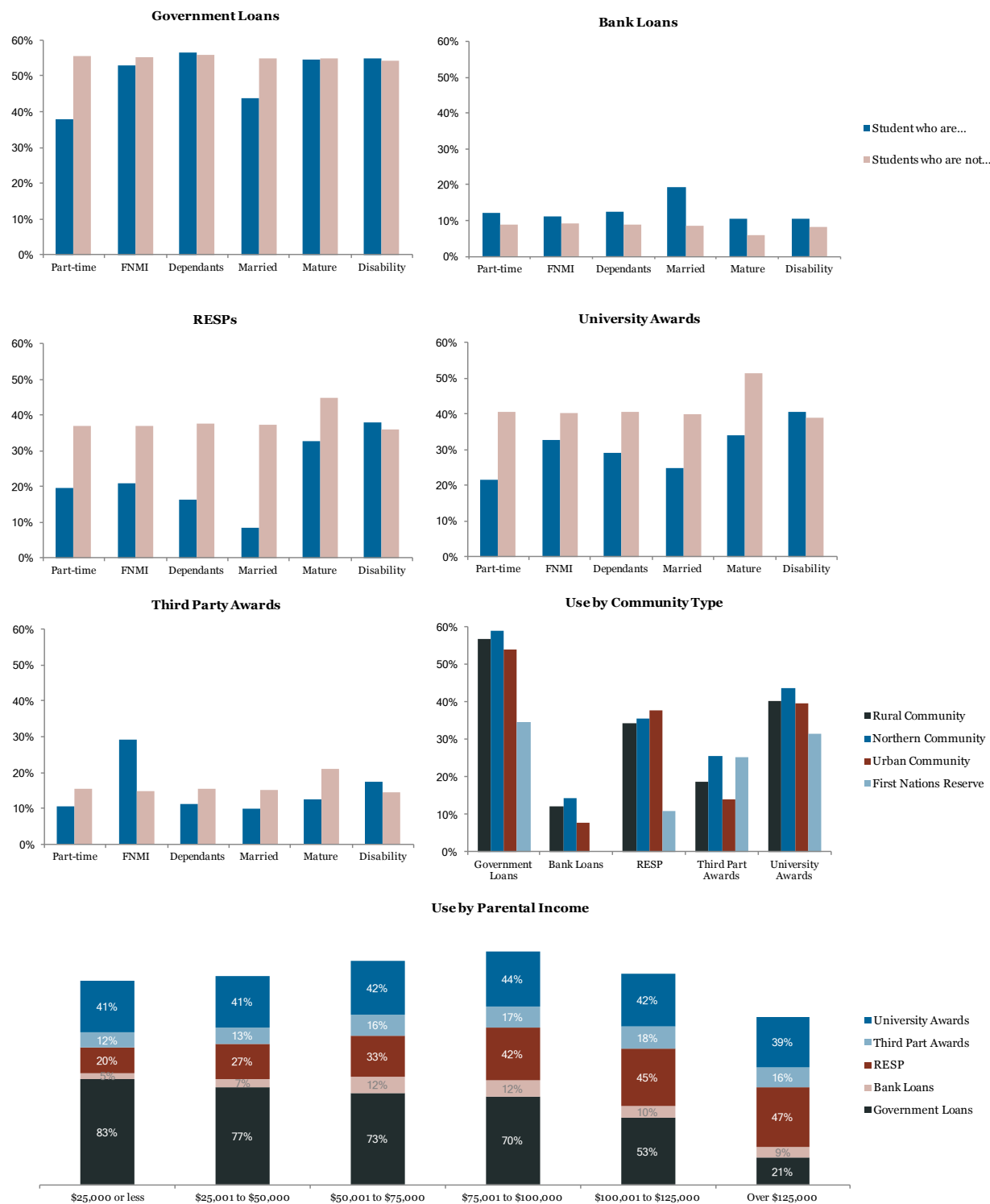
The use of bank loans differed quite starkly across parental income: these were used by, proportionally, more respondents whose parents made between \$50,001 and \$100,000 (middle income) annually compared to respondents in other parental income categories. Bank loans were also used more often among married students (19 percent) than among unmarried students (8 percent).

Comparisons in the use of awards, scholarships, and bursaries also revealed meaningful patterns. First, while respondents who identified with any First Nation, Métis, or Inuit communities used awards from their universities less often than their non-Indigenous counterparts (33 percent compared to 40 percent respectively), they used third-party based funds much more often (29 percent of indigenous respondents versus 15 percent of non-indigenous respondents). These third-party based funds are awards, scholarships, and bursaries received from any organization or source other than respondents’ universities. University-based awards were less commonly used by part-time students, students with dependants, mature students aged 21 and older, and students who grew up on First Nations Reserves. Third-party-based awards were less commonly used by married students, but more commonly among students who grew up on First Nations Reserves.

Our results show varying degrees of use of (and presumably access to) Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs). The pattern of use according to parental income suggests that the higher one’s family income, the more likely they are to use RESPs. There was also a clear pattern suggesting the use of RESPs decreased as age increased. Additionally, part-time students used RESPs less often; 19 percent of part-time respondents used this source compared to 37 percent of full-time respondents. Similarly, just 16 percent of students with dependants used RESPs compared to 38 percent of respondents without dependants and eight percent of married respondents used RESPs compared to 37 percent of unmarried respondents. Eleven percent of respondents who grew up on First Nations Reserves used this financial source compared to 34 to 38 percent of respondents growing up in other types of communities. The divide was less stark between mature students and younger students, where 33 percent of mature respondents used RESPs compared to 45 percent of respondents under 21.

Although the previously discussed differences could not be proven statistically (due to the way the survey question about funding sources was asked) the comparisons indicate potential vulnerabilities among student subgroups. A visual summary of the previous results can be found in figure 3.

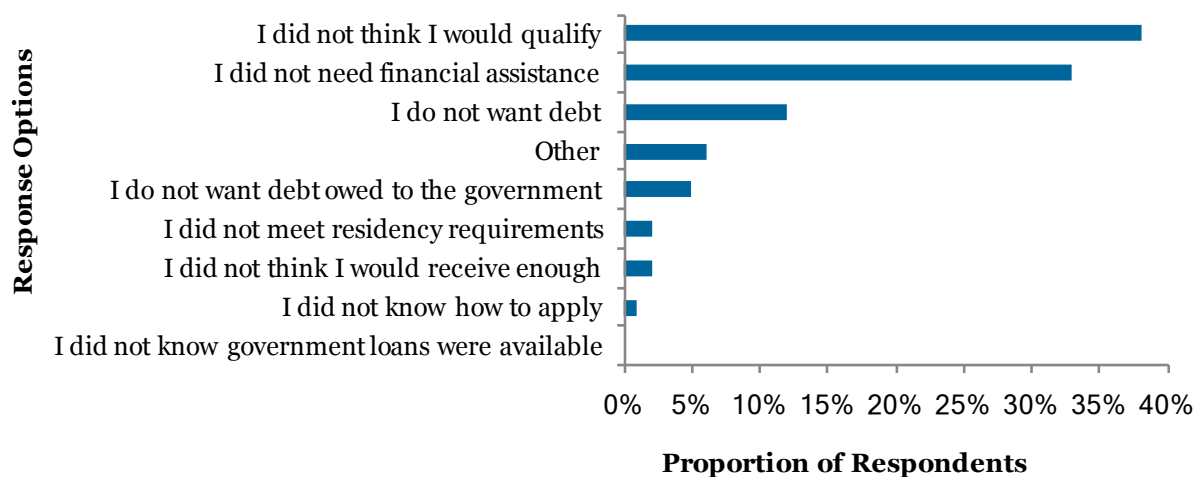
Figure 3: Comparisons of the use of different financial assistance sources among vulnerable student populations.



Borrower Attitudes

We were particularly interested in determining why students chose to use bank loans instead of, or in addition to, government aid. Of the approximately 40 percent of respondents who did not report using government loans in the 2015-16 academic year, 18 percent said they at least applied for government loans, while 82 percent said they did not. The most common reasons for not applying for government loans were: presuming they would not qualify, not needing financial assistance, and not wanting any debt.

Figure 4: Reasons for applying for government loans, n = 1,995.



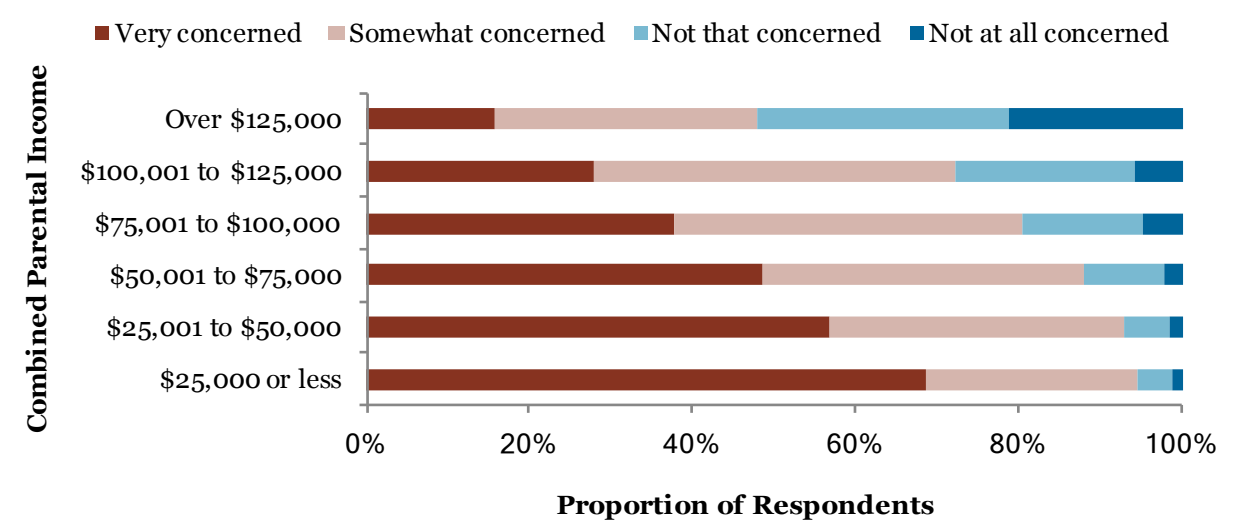
When respondents who applied for bank loans were asked why they chose to borrow money from a bank, rather than or in addition to the government, almost half of them said they needed to supplement what they would receive from the government. The next most common reasons were not qualifying for government loans, as well as thinking they would not qualify for government loans or needing money faster than they could get it from government. Few students (just one in ten) who applied for bank loans thought it would be easier to borrow from a bank than from the government. Overall, most respondents (41 percent) said that applying for government loans was either easy or very easy, while another 40 percent said that it was neither easy nor difficult.

When respondents who applied for bank loans were asked why they chose to borrow money from a bank, rather than or in addition to the government, almost half of them said they needed to supplement what they would receive from the government.

Few statistically significant relationships were found between students' concern about having enough money to complete their education and different demographic characteristics (in fact few reliable and statistically significant relationships were found among other variables). Having dependants, being married, or having a disability only slightly influenced respondents' levels of concern. This influence was determined using chi-square tests for independence. Students with dependants were more likely to report being very concerned

and less likely to report lower levels of concern—somewhat, not that, or not at all concerned; students without dependants were less likely to report feeling very concerned and more likely to report lower levels of concern, $\chi^2(6) = 38.03, p < 0.001, \Phi = 0.09$. Students who were married were more likely to report feeling very concerned about having enough money to finish their degree and less likely to report lower levels of concern, while students who were not married were less likely to report feeling very concerned and more likely to report lower levels of concern, $\chi^2(6) = 12.83, p = 0.046, \Phi = 0.05$. Similarly, students with disabilities were more likely than their peers without disabilities to report feeling very concerned and less likely to report lower levels of concern, $\chi^2(3) = 38.56, p < 0.001, \Phi = 0.09$.

Figure 5: Concern about having enough money to complete education across parental income categories, $n = 3,744$.



Parental income had much more of an effect on respondents’ concern about having enough funds to complete university. The effect was such that lower parental income predicted increased concern. Specifically, students in low income categories (parents making less than \$50,000) were more likely to report feeling very concerned and less likely to report feeling either somewhat concerned, not that concerned, or not at all concerned. Students in the middle-income categories (parents made between \$50,001 and \$100,000) were more likely to report feeling very concerned and somewhat concerned, and less likely to reporting feeling not that concerned or not at all concerned. Students whose parents made \$100,001 to \$125,000 were less likely to report feeling very concerned or concerned, but more likely to report feeling somewhat concerned and not that concerned. Students in the highest income category (parents making more than \$125,000) were more likely to report low levels of concern (not that



concerned, not at all concerned) and less likely to report high levels of concern (very concerned, somewhat concerned), $\chi^2(24) = 903.86, p < 0.001, \Phi = 0.42$.

EMPLOYMENT

The most common reason our respondents chose to work during the summer was the need to earn money in order to continue going to school, followed by the desire to earn disposable income to spend during the school year.

The vast majority of respondents—almost 80 percent—reported working during the summer prior to taking the survey. The majority of respondents worked full-time (between 31 and 40 hours per week) for their entire summer break (13 to 16 weeks). A substantial proportion (28 percent) of respondents indicated working more than 40 hours per week. Less than half (45 percent) of respondents who worked during the summer were earning minimum wage; the other 55 percent were earning an average of \$16 per hour. At these rates, respondents working for minimum wage could have made between \$3,600 and \$5,800 cumulatively, after tax; those making the higher average wage could have made between \$5,200 and \$8,200. Many respondents (56 percent) indicated that they would have worked more hours in the summer if they had been able to find the work. Of the approximate fifth (21 percent) of students who did not work in the summer prior to taking the survey, more than half (55 percent) were looking for work.



Looking at the characteristics of students who chose to work during the summer provides counter intuitive results. Students with dependants were less likely to report working during the summer than students without dependants, $\chi^2(4) = 14.24, p = 0.007, \Phi = .05$. Students from low-income families (those earning less than \$50,000 per year) were also less likely than their counterparts from middle and high income families to report working during the summer, $\chi^2(16) = 135.92, p < 0.001, \Phi = .16$. Students with disabilities were less likely to report working a single job during the summer, but more likely to report working more than one or no jobs, $\chi^2(2) = 10.50, p = 0.005, \Phi = .05$. It's important to keep in mind that when all respondents were asked why they did not work during the summer, the most common reason provided was that they were taking courses in school.

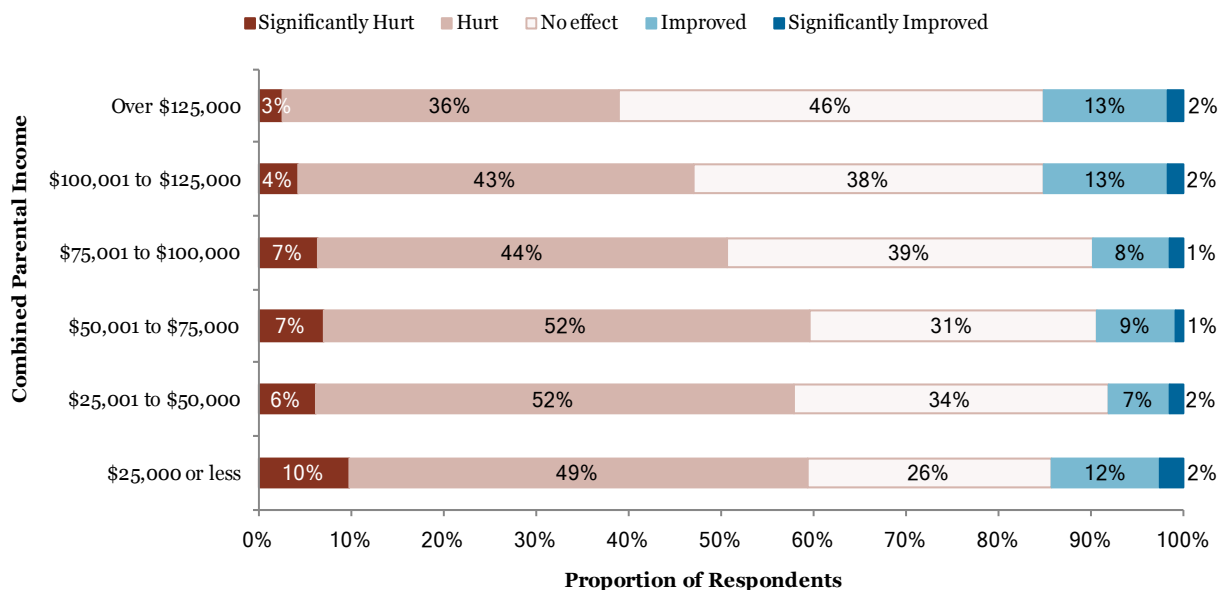
Much fewer respondents—just 38 percent—reported working while studying. Most respondents reported working part-time, or less than 20 hours per week. Exactly half said they earned minimum wage and the other half earned an average of \$16 per hour. Married students were more likely to report working while

studying; unmarried students and students who preferred not to disclose their marital status were less likely to report working while studying, $\chi^2(2) = 38.17, p < 0.001, \Phi = .09$. Students whose parents made \$25,000 or less, over \$125,000, and students who did not know or preferred not to disclose their parents' income were less likely to report working while studying. Students in all other income categories, or who reported parental income was "not applicable," were more likely to be working while studying, $\chi^2(8) = 30.38, p < 0.001, \Phi = .08$.

Participants' enrolment status and age were more determinant variables. Part-time students were more likely to report working while studying and full-time students were less likely to report doing so, $\chi^2(1) = 107.38, p < 0.001, V = .14$. Mature students were more likely to report working while studying, while 17 (or younger), 18, and 19 year old students were less likely to report working while studying, $\chi^2(9) = 235.06, p < 0.001, \Phi = .23$.

Working while studying was perceived to have a negative effect on most respondents' (44 percent) academic performance—negative effects were reported more often among the lowest income respondents, which is illustrated in figure 6. It is important to note, however, that a substantial proportion of working respondents (39 percent) said that their in-study employment had no effect on their academic performance. Additionally, most working respondents (45 percent) said that they would continue to work while studying even if they could pay for tuition and living costs.

Figure 6: Comparison of impact of in-study employment on academic performance and parental income, $n = 1,917$.



DISCUSSION

Part of the purpose of administering the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey (OPSSS) is to evaluate the affordability of a university education today. To this end, specific sections of the questionnaire asked respondents about their use and perception of financial assistance, as well as their engagement and motivations regarding summer time and in-study employment. Results show that students use multiple funding sources to cover the costs of their education and that certain student populations find university less affordable than others.

Generally, students are using safer financial sources; the money they borrowed from family is loaned interest-free, the government offers flexible repayment assistance options, and sizable proportions of our students had access to accrued savings or investments. However, these safer sources do not seem to provide enough funding to exceed the costs of tuition and books on their own. Average tuition in Ontario is \$8,114 and our respondents reported spending an average of \$540 on textbooks and course packs; that's about \$8,650 minimum per academic year.¹ The only sources that provided average amounts above this were bank loans and the Post-Secondary Student Support Program; two sources that were only used by a small minority of students (10 percent and one percent respectively). Employment earnings have the potential to meet these estimated costs, however these are merely bare minimum costs. The situation worsens for high cost programs and materials, and even further if one leaves room for savings or living costs. In short, it appears that the funding sources used most often by students do not adequately cover their educational costs, despite the fact that those sources might be the best financial solutions available.

International students are borrowing far greater amounts and receiving much larger grants than the average Ontarian student. This would be expected, though, recognizing their higher fees, averaging \$29,761.² Interestingly, the average amount borrowed by international respondents (\$30,900) exceeds Ontario's average international student tuition, which is contrary to results among domestic respondents. In the next iteration of this survey, it would be advantageous to breakdown the specific sources of international students' borrowed funds in detail since most international respondents did not have trouble paying their tuition year-to-year. These findings are worth following up on because these increased fees and borrowing do not appear to negatively alter international respondents' perceptions of affordability despite findings that suggest these respondents come from lower income families than domestic students.



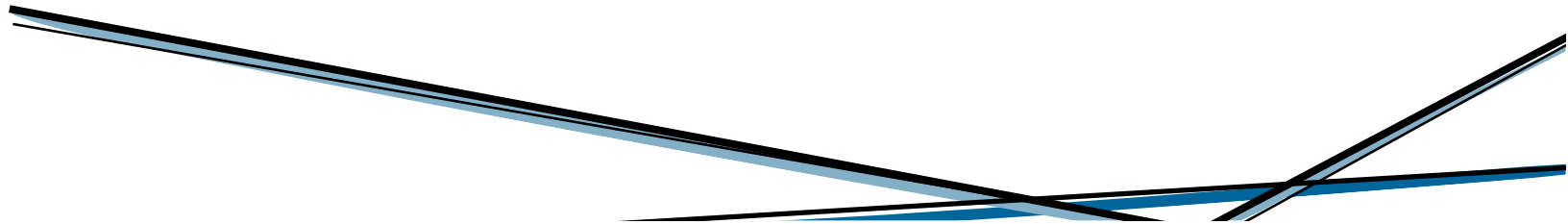
Many of the observed differences in demographic characteristics of borrowers reflect what is already assumed about the use of financial assistance. For instance, we know part-time students and married students have more limited access to government loans and the subsequent suggestion that these students may struggle as a result is not novel. Where our findings are unique is in the lack of decisive evidence for which other funding sources are making up for this lack of government financing. While married students appear to turn to bank loans more often than their counterparts, part-time students were not found to be using any other funding source more often than full-time students (namely, personal savings as one might expect). None of the findings indicated that other especially vulnerable groups were disproportionately using bank loans either. This lack of clarity is concerning as it implies that part-time students, in particular, as well as married students to an extent, may be experiencing the heaviest financial burdens related to educational costs.

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It is also concerning that the use of university-based awards, scholarships, and bursaries was uneven. Again, part-time students are less financially supported; they reported using university-based awards, scholarships, and bursaries less frequently than full-time students. Access to these funding options may also be limited by age, as our mature students reported using them less often. This would be another particularly concerning finding given the understanding that Indigenous students are frequently mature students as well, if not for our findings that Indigenous respondents seemed to be using third-party awards, scholarships, and bursaries more than their peers.

Ultimately, the survey results suggest that the financial needs of part-time students are perhaps the most forgotten. These students seem to have inequitable access to financial assistance and are slipping through the system's cracks. These students are underrepresented among government loan users, RESP users, and university award users. Looking at these proportional differences in their use of various funding sources, we're left to assume that these students are financing their education on their own, with very little external assistance (loans, awards, savings) year-to-year, but are more likely to do so than their full-time counterparts. To combat any assumptions that part-time students' educational costs are lower, it's important to realize that it takes these students longer to complete their credentials and that they may have competing financial priorities as they tend to also be married, mature students, and/or have dependants.³

Results show definitively that the government loan system has been losing users due to misinformation. A minority of students reported using bank loans, but they indicated using this source due to the perceived inadequacy of government sources. There are students who are borrowing money from the bank to supplement what they receive from government and may not realize that they are able to appeal their initial need assessment. Then there are students who self-select out of OSAP entirely because of perceptions of ineligibility, cumbersome application processes, or a lack of timely funding. Students' sensitivity to timeliness is notable since this reaction may show that they are unaware of the deferred payment deadlines for students receiving OSAP.



As indicated by many respondents feeling concerned that they will not have enough money to finish their degrees, students and their families appear to be taking on greater financial burdens than they may have to. This sentiment is especially applicable to low-income students that typically have less liquidity, less access to savings, and have increased levels of concern. However, the government loan system would do well to look at specific mechanisms to better support married students and students with dependants, since they have less access to government funds, and higher education and living expenses than the typical university student.

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Most of our members earn their money for school during the summer. This is indicated by the large majority (80 percent) that reported working at least one job in the summer compared to just over a third working during the school year. This is also verified by the most commonly reported reasons for working in the summer: to make money in order to return to school or to earn disposable income for the upcoming school year. It is also notable that a considerable number of respondents said they would work more in the summer if they could. Even with a variety of financial assistance sources at their disposal, our students still need supplementary income. We feel our findings show quite clearly that students are paying for their education, in part, out of their own pockets.

For the students who did not work during the summer, it is most likely that they were taking classes instead. With indications that students with dependants—who also tend to be part-time students—are least likely to work during the summer, our results place additional emphasis on the need to further develop financial aid systems for this particular group.

Despite this applying to only a minority of respondents, it was unfortunate to find that working while studying had a perceived negative influence on academic performance. It is the most vulnerable students who are working while studying (married students, lower income students, part-time students, and mature students); those who cannot necessarily afford to retake classes in which they do poorly. In this way, their persistence—and ultimately their future academic or career endeavours—may be limited by their financial situations.

CONCLUSION

Financial issues are a clear policy priority for OUSA members. Only slightly more than a third of the respondents were able to claim that they had no education-related debt to date. The remaining members appear to owe money to multiple sources, namely the government, their families, and credit card companies. Reassuringly though, few respondents reported using precarious assistance sources like banks loans, lines of credit, and credit cards. Results suggest that correcting public misinformation could draw some of these students back towards the government loan system.

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Going forward, the government should focus its policy efforts on improving assistance programs for specific student groups. Students with low family incomes are already anticipating several updates to OSAP intended to benefit them specifically. Next, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should look to improve the program for students with dependants, married students, and part-time students. Perhaps most concerning, our results suggest that an undergraduate education may be especially unaffordable for part-time students.

This research on the affordability of university education in Ontario is an important component of OUSA's advocacy process. The OPSSS allows the organization to confirm anecdotal concerns of students and make evidence-based recommendations to sector partners. It is our hope that our partners will also use these data to inform their advocacy and policy development efforts. Maintaining the affordability of post-secondary education is a collective responsibility; a goal that can only be achieved by sharing research, data, and centering the student voice.

This report has focused on the financial aspects of members' responses and reported the results from the student financial assistance and employment sections of the questionnaire. Our biennial student survey was designed, however, to gain insight into a multitude of aspects of the student experience. The OPSSS also provides comprehensive data on students' behaviours and attitudes, concerns and preferences related to the academic experience, institutional mobility, municipal issues, and students' identities. All of this information combined enables and empowers post-secondary stakeholders to move closer to ensuring all willing and qualified individuals can access and excel in higher education. We encourage our stakeholders to immerse themselves further in this survey data by reading our research reports focused on Accessibility and Quality.

ENDNOTES

1. Statistics Canada, "Table 477-0077: Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study," CANSIM (database), accessed September 6, 2016, <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=4770077&pattern=&stByVal=1&p1=1&p2=31&tabMode=dataTable&csid=>.
2. Ibid.
3. Marc Gurrisi and Danielle Pierre, Accessibility: 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey Results (Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2016).

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