

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

TUITION, ANCILLARY, & INCIDENTAL FEES

POLICY PAPER BRIEF

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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SUMMARY

The *Tuition, Ancillary & Incidental Fees* policy paper was developed by undergraduate students through the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance to identify student concerns and propose student-driven recommendations for Ontario's post-secondary sector. Tuition, ancillary fees, incidental fees, and additional learning costs shape whether students can access, afford, and complete post-secondary education in Ontario.

The paper focuses on the systems, regulations, institutional practices, and provincial frameworks that determine how students are charged for tuition, student services, housing, meal plans, course materials, work-integrated learning, and administrative processes. While these fees fund important institutional operations and student-facing services, students are concerned about affordability, transparency, fairness, inconsistent regulation, and the growing reliance on student contributions to compensate for gaps in public funding.

The following principles, concerns, and recommendations were crafted by undergraduate students to advance a more accessible, affordable, accountable, equitable, and high-quality post-secondary system.

UNAFFORDABLE AND UNPREDICTABLE TUITION FRAMEWORKS

I. Renewing Ontario's Tuition Framework

Concerns:

Students have identified concerns that increases in tuition without proportional increases in student financial aid create barriers to access for students. Students enrolled in programs deemed tuition anomalies are also often unaware that their tuition may increase by up to 7.5 percent annually over the course of their degree, limiting predictability and making it harder to plan for the total cost of post-secondary education.

Recommendations:

The **Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES)** should:

- maintain the current tuition increase cap at 2% or inflation, whichever is lower, while ensuring the increases are matched by proportional increases in student financial
- reduce the tuition increase cap from 7.5 percent to 5 percent per year or double the rate of inflation, whichever is lower, for programs deemed tuition anomalies.

2. Professional Student Tuition

Concerns:

Students have raised concerns that the high costs of professional programs create significant barriers for prospective and current students. These costs can result in substantial long-term debt for graduates and may make professional programs less accessible to lower-income, first-generation, racialized, and other underrepresented students. Students are also often unaware of the true and comprehensive cost of professional programs due to limited transparency around mandatory work-integrated learning costs and associated commonly incurred educational fees.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- expand the Learn and Stay Grant to include additional professional programs not covered by the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness Program in order to reduce financial barriers for students in professional programs that currently lack targeted financial support.
- mandate that for professional programs, Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) clearly incorporate federal, provincial and institutional financial aid information into the application process

MCURES should:

- mandate that professional programs report all mandatory ancillary fees and estimated additional educational costs rather than listing only the base tuition amount.

3. Out-Of-Province Student Tuition

Concerns:

Students have highlighted that higher tuition for out-of-province students discourages interprovincial mobility, particularly for lower-income students. With limited revenue options, some institutions have become increasingly reliant on out-of-province student tuition increase provisions, unfairly placing the burden of provincial underfunding on out-of-province students.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- remove the domestic out-of-province tuition increase provision and require that tuition for out-of-province Canadian students be subject to the same annual increase cap as in-province students.

4. International Student Tuition

Concerns:

Students are concerned that high, unregulated international student tuition and limited need-based financial aid make attending Ontario institutions financially inaccessible to many prospective international students. International students pay disproportionately high tuition and fees compared to domestic students, largely to compensate for insufficient government funding in the post-secondary sector. International students may also lack adequate recourse if they lose access to the financial resources they relied on at the start of their studies.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- regulate international tuition increases at a maximum of five percent per year for incoming students and at two percent per year for current students.

MCURES should:

- mandate through the Tuition Framework that universities establish an emergency need-based grant at a similar rate as the domestic tuition set-aside for international students.

INEQUITABLE TUITION PAYMENT AND PENALTY PROCESSES

I. Deferment Fees

Concerns:

Students' admission offers may be put at risk when they are unable to defer tuition payments or pay required deferment fees. Requiring lump-sum payments instead of flexible payment schedules can unfairly penalize students relying on out-of-province financial aid, international student loans, scholarships, or other third-party funding that may not align with institutional tuition deadlines. Information about tuition deferment processes is also often inaccessible, creating additional barriers for students in difficult financial situations.

Recommendations:

MCURES should:

- mandate through the Tuition Fee Framework that all institutions allow flexible payment schedules that align with the timing of financial aid disbursements beyond OSAP
- develop best practices for communicating, developing, and facilitating deferment fee processes across Ontario universities in the Tuition Fee Framework.

2. Late Fee Guidelines

Concerns:

Students facing extenuating circumstances may be unable to pay tuition on time and can be disproportionately burdened by financial penalties. Some institutions lack clear processes for reporting extenuating circumstances related to tuition payment deadlines, creating barriers to fee relief or appeals. Students are also not always given adequate or timely notice when account balances approach the threshold where late fees or interest are applied. These financial penalties can result in registration holds, withheld documentation, delayed graduation, or other academic restrictions that compound financial hardship and undermine academic outcomes.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- outline procedures for fee transfers, ensuring that payments are made within reasonable timelines, avoiding administrative surcharges for late payments.

MCURES should:

- mandate that institutions implement appeal processes that waive late fees for students affected by extenuating circumstances.
- require institutions to integrate notice periods into their student fee collection frameworks, such that students are alerted when their account balances are within punishable thresholds before any charges are applied.
- strengthen provincial guidance on financial penalties by requiring clear communication standards, transparency around late fee application, and reasonable limits on penalty rates, caps, and alternatives that support student payment.
- mandate standardized provincial caps on late fees and interest rates, tied explicitly to cost recovery rather than discretionary institutional rates.
- mandate that institutions be prohibited from applying late fees or interest to balances pending confirmed public financial aid or institutional funding.
- mandate that late fee penalties do not result in academic restrictions that delay graduation or otherwise undermine academic outcomes.

LIMITED TRANSPARENCY AROUND STUDENT FEES

I. Student Fee Transparency

Concerns:

Students are often unaware of the true and comprehensive cost of post-secondary education because mandatory co-operative education fees, experiential learning requirements, ancillary fees, and other required program costs are not always clearly disclosed. Some post-secondary institutions do not publish budgets, spending reports, or information about the use of tuition revenue in a way that is easily accessible to students. Tuition information and cost breakdowns are also often not transparent to students during the application process or throughout their program. The absence of a centralized public database also makes it difficult to compare total post-secondary costs across institutions, while students often have little insight into the total cost of their degree year over year.

Recommendations:

MCURES should:

- mandate that all institutions provide timely notice of proposed tuition changes and breakdown of tuition to all prospective incoming and current students.
- establish standardized best practices for universities to produce public reports on budget and spending.
- produce a yearly public report that outlines a breakdown of each university's tuition revenue streams and major spending categories in an accessible format.
- collaborate with the Council of Ontario Universities to leverage the existing OUIInfo platform to create a centralized cost-comparison tool outlining tuition, ancillary fees, and other mandatory program fees over the duration of study.
- mandate that postsecondary institutions publish the year-to-year tuition and associated program fees for the previous year in an accessible format.

2. Ancillary Fee Transparency

Concerns:

The purposes, benefits, and administration of institutional ancillary fees are often poorly communicated, limiting transparency and institutional accountability. The provincial term “compulsory non-tuition-related ancillary fee” is not used consistently across Ontario post-secondary institutions, which can create confusion for students trying to understand what they are being charged. Refund and opt-out processes are often decentralized from payment processes, and students may face financial loss during enrolment status changes if they are unaware of ancillary fee refund timelines or procedures.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- establish standalone ancillary fee guidelines, distinct from the tuition fee framework, in consultation with post-secondary institution administrators, student association representatives, and the Council of Ontario Universities (COU).

- ensure that the ancillary fee guideline be reviewed every three years to reflect ongoing changes to the sector in consultation with student association representatives.
- update the ancillary fee protocol to mandate that the term “compulsory non-tuition related ancillary fee” be used consistently across the sector.
- mandate that all post-secondary institutions collect and refund all ancillary fees through a centralized online system with clear well-promoted opt-out and refund guidelines.

MCURES should:

- mandate that post-secondary institutions publish a report highlighting each institutional ancillary fee funding stream breakdown and utilization at the end of the fiscal year for students and public viewing.

3. Professional Student Tuition

Concerns:

Despite being the primary funders and main beneficiaries of ancillary fee-funded services, students are often excluded from formal decision-making and consultation processes related to how these fees are allocated and governed.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- mandate that students have significant voting representation on the governing bodies of the university services funded by ancillary fees.

MCURES should:

- establish a best-practices guideline for how post-secondary institutions receive student feedback in regard to the effectiveness of student services.

UNEVEN COST-SHARING

1. Operational Funding

Concerns:

Students are concerned that with operating grants making up less than half of university revenues, Ontario's institutions are now publicly assisted instead of publicly funded. This shifts the operating costs of a public good onto students through tuition and ancillary fees.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- increase operating grants so that provincial contributions are equitable and make up a majority of operating revenue for post-secondary institutions.

2. Capital Funding

Concerns:

Across post-secondary campuses, there is insufficient funding for new student-facing capital projects, placing a disproportionate share of the financial responsibility onto students. Students also often have limited access to meaningful input into capital projects funded through student fees.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- mandate that student-funded capital projects operate under a dual-approval structure and equitable cost-sharing framework requiring student association ratification of major changes, equitable student representation in capital oversight, and timely project and budget reporting to students.
- create priority funding for student-facing capital projects aimed at enhancing the student experience.
- ensure that the funding allotted for deferred maintenance includes student-funded spaces and that capital maintenance grants are available to support the continuous function of these spaces.
- mandate that, for all student-ancillary-funded spaces, agreements must be made between post-secondary institutions and student associations to establish a consultation framework of the project that prioritizes student concerns and priorities.

Recommendations Continued:

- mandate that post-secondary institutions include a clear breakdown of baseline operating funding and its allocation in their annual financial reports to improve transparency around how institutional funding is utilized.

MCURES should:

- mandate that each institution is transparent to their students about the student-university cost sharing of capital projects, and how the funding compares to the standards of responsible cost sharing.

3. Baseline Student Services

Concerns:

Services supporting students' personal well-being, inclusion, and safety have become overly dependent on ancillary fees due to the lack of provincial funding. Many fees that fund student services are not considered "essential" under the Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines, which can make funding unstable. Inadequate and inconsistent investment in baseline student services disproportionately impacts marginalized students, who are more likely to rely on campus-based supports.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- classify ancillary fees that fund baseline student services as "essential" under ancillary fee guidelines.
- co-fund baseline student services and support that provides a reasonable minimum standard of safety, inclusion, and well-being at post-secondary institutions across the province.
- co-fund baseline student services and support in an effort to provide an equitable and adequate standard of safety, inclusion, and well-being at post-secondary institutions across the province.

THREATS TO STUDENT FEE AUTONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

I. Student Fee Autonomy

Concerns:

Blanket classification of ancillary fees as optional creates financial uncertainty for programs and services approved through democratic processes, undermining their stability and long-term sustainability. Provincial regulation on student association fees can also undermine democratic processes that provide students with essential services. Recommendation: MCURES should continue to honour the autonomy of student associations and institutions by allowing them to implement the democratic processes in place

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- engage in consultations with post-secondary institutions and recognized student associations when developing ancillary fee policies, ensuring that changes to fee payment and distribution do not compromise the stability of existing services.

MCURES should:

- mandate that the introduction, modification, removal, and classification of ancillary fees be supported by a demonstrated majority of voting students through institutionally defined democratic processes, as set out in existing student association by-laws.

2. Gaps in Ancillary Fee Protocols

Concerns:

Students are concerned that those who do not access on-campus or main campus facilities experience limited benefits of the facilities and services funded by their fees. Not all institutional ancillary fees are reviewed with adequate student consultation or renewed within reasonable timelines to ensure relevance to students.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- establish frameworks requiring institutions to include terms on the categorization, approval, review timelines, and oversight bodies of various fees.

MCURES should:

- require universities to have a policy, developed in consultation with students, with respect to how ancillary fees are assessed for students studying online and on satellite campuses.
- require universities to adopt policies governing the charging of ancillary fees, developed in consultation with students.

INCONSISTENT OVERSIGHT OF STUDENT FEES

I. University-Controlled Housing And Residences

Concerns:

Student residences are often significantly less affordable than the rental market, limiting student access to safe and quality housing. Students are not adequately represented in decision-making groups that govern university-owned housing and residence operations. Housing prices can be set at fully autonomous rates by universities, which could be seen as a revenue-generating mechanism in financially difficult times. The enrollment growth of many post-secondary institutions has outpaced the rate of available student-suitable housing in their surrounding communities.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- mandate, through standalone ancillary fee guidelines, that all university residences or housing services have an oversight body with significant voting student representation.

- mandate that any profit generated by housing services be used to maintain, improve, and build on-campus student housing.
- provide targeted capital funding towards the construction of more off-campus university-controlled student housing.
- mandate that universities must have housing available for all first year rental-dependent students and a proportion of the returning students.
- partner with the federal government to provide targeted funding and incentives for universities to expand student housing capacity without increasing housing-related ancillary fees.

MCURES should:

- compile a periodic report on university residences on the state of the student housing system, including a breakdown of aggregate revenues, operating expenditures, and contributions to any housing capital fund.

2. Meal Plan Functionality

Concerns:

Students have expressed concerns about universities not adequately communicating details surrounding the functionality and value of meal plans to students after their academic term ends, creating a general lack of understanding and trust. Many university meal plans with one set cost or tier do not reflect the actual cost for the year, often requiring additional top-ups throughout the year and meal plans lose their value if not used within the term the plan was purchased for. Students may be unaware of changes to their meal plan, including price changes and restaurant availability, prior to purchasing a meal plan.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- mandate that universities transfer any leftover meal plan dollars to monetary value, flex dollars, or an equivalent accessible system, after a residence or academic term has ended.
- mandate that universities communicate the accurate cost of meal plans, including the average amounts of top ups required, to students.
- mandate that information regarding changes to meal and dining options be disseminated prior to payment of the meal plan.

MCURES should:

- mandate that universities provide detailed information on the functionality, value, and accurate cost of meal plans, including the average amounts of top ups required to students.
- mandate that meal plans do not charge students Capital, Administrative, or Yearly renewal fees.

3. Course Withdrawal Costs

Concerns:

Students are concerned with course withdrawal fees not currently being regulated by the provincial government, allowing universities to set and revise these fees at their own discretion, which can limit students' flexibility when adjusting their course enrollment decisions. Tuition refunds for course withdrawals are not always aligned with the true cost of education delivered. Current course withdrawal fee waiver processes can be inconsistent and overly burdensome, creating barriers for students experiencing extenuating circumstances.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- establish best practices for tuition refund models during course withdrawals that accurately reflect the cost of education delivered.
- require post-secondary institutions to publish transparent course withdrawal policies, prohibit withdrawal costs during the official add/drop period when course configurations change, and mandate waivers for documented extenuating circumstances.

4. Administrative/Miscellaneous Fees

Concerns:

Administrative fees are often nominal, but are collected across many departments on campus, creating barriers to fee-by-fee regulation. There is no provincial regulation preventing net-profit-generating administrative fees. Fees that could be considered administrative are not classified and, as such, lack regulation.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- establish that administrative fees must be at or lower than the cost of providing the services funded by those fees.
- mandate that before the introduction or change in an administrative fee, a reasonable assessment of the additional cost of providing that service be conducted, and that these assessment documents be made publicly available.
- mandate that universities provide essential academic records at no cost for current students and recently graduated students (of up to five years out of school).
- establish that any miscellaneous fee should be treated identically to an administrative fee, with this status remaining until the fee is reclassified.

5. Student Directed Funds

Concerns:

Post-secondary institutions are becoming increasingly reliant on student directed funds to provide the necessary components of a quality education to students. There is limited data transparency on the administration and use of student directed funds to sustain baseline educational quality. In some cases, students who contributed to student directed funds do not have control over the disbursement of those funds, either directly or through representatives. Parties eligible to apply to student directed funds often are unaware that they are eligible to apply to them.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- mandate that student directed funds be required to publish their financial information and a list of sponsored projects in a way that is readily available to students who've contributed to it.

- task post-secondary institutions to systematically assess and readjust areas of their budgets that consistently require supplemental funding, from student directed funds to preserve the quality of academic programming.
- provide envelope funding to post-secondary institutions where student directed funds are often used to preserve the quality of academic programming.

MCURES should:

- mandate that disbursement decisions of jointly governed student directed funds be made by a representative body composed primarily of students.
- match disbursements made by student directed funds which contribute to direct learning objectives and/or experiential learning requirements
- mandate that institutions with student directed funds promote the availability of those funds to all eligible applicants.

6. System-Wide and Vendor Fees

Concerns:

Students have expressed concerns about system-wide and vendor fees being exempt from current requirements under the Ancillary Fee Guidelines, allowing these fees to be implemented without consistent transparency, governance standards, or meaningful student participation in the decision-making process.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- remove vendor and system-wide fee exemptions from the tuition fee framework and ancillary fee guidelines, ensuring these fees are subject to the same transparent consultation and accountability as other ancillary fees.

UNAFFORDABLE ADDITIONAL LEARNING COSTS

I. Learning Materials

Concerns:

The additional costs associated with textbooks, course materials, digital resources, and other learning materials place a significant financial burden on students, particularly students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Courses often require additional software, programs, and/or subscriptions to complete and submit assignments, in addition to course textbooks, creating additional financial barriers placing students who cannot afford to purchase these materials at an academic disadvantage.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- work to create a Provincial Textbook Tax Credit, similar to the previous Federal Textbook Tax Credit, and expand it to digital learning materials.
- mandate that established post-secondary institutions' course material rental programs regularly replace or update items in their loaned equipment inventory.

MCURES should:

- provide targeted grant funding to post-secondary institutions to establish and expand subsidized rental and used-material programs that allow students to rent or purchase physical learning materials.

2. Work-Integrated Learning

Concerns:

Students have identified that work-integrated learning fees are exempt under the Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines protocol which allows post-secondary institutions the ability to charge students high and unregulated amounts for work-integrated learning services, making this educational opportunity inaccessible for some students. Post-secondary institutions have experienced an increase in students aiming to participate in a work-integrated learning program but do not have sufficient opportunities available to meet student demand. Students who cannot participate in a work-integrated learning program are placed at both an academic and professional disadvantage, potentially affecting their ability to gain employment and enter graduate studies.

Recommendations:

The **provincial government** should:

- invest in on-campus work-integrated learning programs to reduce these programs' dependency on student ancillary fees.
- include work-integrated learning fees as a non-exempt fee within the ancillary fee protocol.

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