



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of approximately 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

## POLICY BRIEF: STUDENT HEALTH & WELLNESS

Despite recent investments, Ontario's students are concerned about the state of mental health, physical health, sexual health, substance abuse and addictions, as well as medical accommodations within the province. In areas such as mental health, but also for many physical ailments, universities have been forced to shoulder the majority of responsibility in treating and caring for students as patients, despite being underequipped and not-designed to provide these services. Furthermore, substance abuse rates continue to rise in university aged youth, and many students feel that they are lacking the sexual health resources they need while attending post secondary studies.

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Insufficient Mental Health Care**

Students are concerned that the uncoordinated efforts of campus and community partners to support students' mental health needs are creating greater confusion and strain on the system, and that the lack of supported and coordinated efforts going towards satisfying students' mental health needs is not currently being addressed in the post-secondary sector. Students are also concerned that financial barriers are continuing to provide students from receiving the mental health care they need. Students believe that there is still a failure to prevent crisis interventions at the appropriate stage for post-secondary students as a result of the lack of proactive, preventative care, and that the lack of exposure to the importance of mental wellness prior to entering PSE is not effectively preparing students. Additionally, students feel that there is currently a lack of data and understanding of the prevention and transition needs of students entering post-secondary education.

#### **Inadequate Substance Abuse Education**

Students are concerned that there is limited information on the effects of ingesting cannabis as well as ingesting it with other substances simultaneously, including alcohol, as well as the lack of widespread understanding of the dangers of driving under the influence of cannabis. Students are also worried about the lack of access to resources to test their substances for purity, especially considering that opioid overdose is the third leading cause of accidental deaths in Ontario, and that there is an increase in fentanyl contamination of non-opioid drugs. Furthermore, students in Ontario have raised concerns about the long wait times for off-campus addictions treatment. Finally, students believe that since all Ontario universities do not participate in the National College Health Assessment II, it has limited the reliability of the Ontario reference group and has also limited the amount

of data available to the sector.

#### **Lack of Adequate Medical Accommodation**

The practice of universities often requiring medical documentation in order to receive academic accommodations has raised concerns that these practices are placing financial strains on students and the broader health care sector. Additionally, the process of submitting medical notes to faculty can result in students having to provide specific details of their diagnoses, or undiagnosed condition, along with contributing unnecessary stress to the lives of everyone involved in the process. Students are also concerned about the fact that all undergraduate students do not have equal access to services provided under OHIP+.

#### **Insufficient Sexual Health Education**

Students transitioning from secondary school to PSE often experience a lifestyle change that can be detrimental if they are not equipped with accurate information and resources surrounding sexual health. Students are concerned that this, coupled with the stigma that exists around sexual health, may discourage students from utilizing sexual health resources. Students have raised concerns that the gaps that exist between institutional and community sexual health supports can create a barrier for students accessing these resources, and that the financial burden of post-secondary education may limit the ability for students to afford and use contraceptive methods.

#### **Physically Unhealthy Campuses**

Students have identified the fact that the majority of post-secondary students fail to meet weekly requirements for physical activity as a concern. At some institutions, students who attend satellite campuses pay the same ancillary fees for facilities and services that are not located on their campus, making these services inaccessible. These issues, coupled with access barriers such as the lack of available adaptive sports, are cause for concern about

the ability for students to live physically healthy lives. Moreover, students have identified an insufficiency in infrastructure designed to facilitate nutritious eating amongst students. This has resulted in a failure for post-secondary institutions' dietary options to reflect the diversity and values of their student population.

### **Food Insecurity as a Barrier to Success**

Students are concerned about food insecurity on post-secondary campuses. Oftentimes, many students are unable to access affordable and nutritious meal options while on campus, and to assist their peers, students are forced to self-fund food banks. Furthermore, students in need may not be aware of, or feel embarrassed utilizing, student-provided food bank resources.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Improving Mental Health Care**

The government should update Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health & Addictions Strategy to recognize post-secondary students as a distinct cohort, and clearly define the roles and responsibilities of health-care, community agencies, and post-secondary institutions, for addressing mental health. The government should also take a multi-ministerial approach in developing a framework addressing how service providers should work together to avoid fragmented care. Students recommend that post-secondary institutions work together with local health-care agencies to develop and implement a plan to assist students with mental health concerns. Additionally, the government should provide cost-free mental health care to students, and dedicate funding for community-based mental health providers to supply diverse counselling on campuses.

The government should be effectively preparing students with necessary mental health resilience and coping skills prior to, and during, post-secondary education. OUSA recommends that the Ministry of Education develop curriculum that emphasizes resilience and coping skills during K-12, and that the government develop and mandate transition programming for students as they finish their high school education and transition into post-secondary studies. Finally, students call on the province to invest in early-warning systems for primary, secondary, and PSE systems.

### **Preventing Substance Abuse and Addictions**

Students recommend that the provincial government advocate to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to place serving size labels on all alcoholic items. OUSA recommends that the government utilize an appropriate percentage of the sales tax on cannabis to fund an informational campaign targeting young adults, and that future government-sponsored alcohol and drug awareness campaigns work to address the combined effects of marijuana and alcohol. Students recommend that MTO partner with COU to develop a student-targeted campaign about impaired driving, highlighting the Ontario laws

and regulations on consumption. Additionally, the government provide funding for free fentanyl-testing strips to on campus clinics and pharmacies.

Students believe that the provincial government should mandate that all universities participate in the NCHA II, and that the government cover the costs associated of the survey of institutions that administer it. Students also recommend that the government, CAMH, and COU partner to expand and promote the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health survey in an effort to collect data on post-secondary student consumption.

**Improving Medical Accommodations and OHIP+** OUSA recommends that the government mandate a province-wide medical accommodations and considerations policy for all post-secondary institutions to follow, and that the government extend the guidelines laid out in the *Employment Standards Act* regarding medical notes to include post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, students call on the government to ensure that additional programs affecting students under OHIP include all OHIP eligible post-secondary students enrolled in a degree program.

### **Addressing Sexual Health Issues**

Students recommend that the Ministry of Education ensure that adequate sexual health education is taking place in K-12 studies. Students also believe that the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care should extend OHIP+ to provide full coverage of diverse contraceptive methods, and that the government should provide funding for anonymous on-Campus STI testing in collaboration with community sexual health clinics. Finally, the government should mandate that all urgent and emergency care centres have sexual assault kits available.

### **Creating Physically Healthier Campuses**

OUSA recommends the government establish a minimum standard regarding inclusive and accessible recreational spaces on university campuses. Students also believe that MAESD should mandate that universities must complete an institutional assessment of all recreational and athletic spaces to identify under-resourced areas as a requirement to qualify for provincial funding. Students also call on the government to mandate that all on campus eateries highlight provincially provided nutrition information, including ingredient lists and potential allergens.

### **Addressing Student Food Insecurity**

Students recommend that the government fund the creation and maintenance of student-led food banks to support low-income students, and that the government should establish a grant to be utilized as needed by student-run food banks to maintain the necessary infrastructure to provide nutritious options. Finally, students call on MAESD to partner with COU and Meal Exchange to complete a system analysis of food insecurity and systems on university campuses.