Evaluating Public Opinion on Post-Secondary education in Ontario

A survey of 1,002 Ontarians

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1.0 Executive Summary

In early September 2011, OUSA and the College Student Alliance commissioned Abacus Data to conduct a public opinion survey of Ontarians over the age of 18 to gauge the public's attitudes towards post-secondary education. An election is a great time to survey the public because it is the one time when it is most engaged and most likely to be thinking about policy issues. With an election underway and school back in session, it was an excellent time to find out where the public is when it comes to PSE.

The survey research conducted by OUSA and the CSA clearly demonstrates a consensus among Ontarians about the importance of PSE not only to students in the system now and those entering in the future, but to the future prosperity and quality of life of all Ontarians. Ontarians strongly agree that student debt loads are too high and that tuition fees prevent capable students from obtaining an advanced education. For those with children under 18, many worry about their ability to help their children pay for their education

Keeping this in mind, it is no surprise that a majority of Ontarians rate PSE a top priority for government spending and that over five in ten respondents would be willing to pay more taxes if it meant that tuition fees would be reduced and student aid improved.

1.1 Key Findings

- Ontarians identify PSE as important for Ontario's future prosperity. Overall, 91% of respondents
 indicated that post-secondary education is very or somewhat important to preserving the quality
 of life and levels of prosperity over the next 20 years.
- As an issue of importance, post-secondary education fares well against health care and hydro rates. While only 18% of respondents felt that post-secondary education was more important than health care when it comes to the future prosperity of the province, a plurality (44%) felt that the two areas were equally important.
- Ontarians agree that tuition fees prevent qualified students from accessing PSE and that student
 debt levels are too high. Large majorities of Ontarians surveyed agreed that tuition fees prevent
 qualified students from attending post-secondary school and that student debt loads are a heavy
 burden on students. These attitudes are consistent across socio-economic and regional
 subgroups.
- Support for increased public funding can be augmented with key qualifiers. When respondents
 were asked whether the government should spend more on post-secondary education if it meant
 that individuals had to pay more taxes, only 15% strongly agreed. However, when the statement
 was prefaced with a qualifier, saying that tuition fees would be decreased and aid increased,
 'strongly support' responses jumped by eight percentage points to 23%.
- Seven in ten Ontarians with children under 18 are worried about being able to help pay for their children's education. A large majority of Ontarians with children under 18 reported being very or somewhat worried about their ability to help pay for their dependents' education. This finding was consistent across subgroups and even different income levels.

1.2 The Demographic Divide

Throughout this report, we will report on strong relationships between opinion and respondent age. In many cases, these differences were clearly directional, with responses shifting consistently with age (for example, respondents becoming more opposed to a statement in older demographic groups).

However, in most cases where these directional age differences emerged, 18 to 29 year olds were more likely to align with 45 to 60 year olds, and 30 to 44 year olds were more likely to align with those over 60. This is likely the result of the fact that respondents in the 45 to 60 demographic are much more likely to be parents of students who are at some stage of post-secondary education than those in any other demographic.

The variation by age is important to consider when designing targeted messaging or policy recommendations. Ontarians who are in post-secondary school or recently completed it as well as their parents are clearly the strongest allies of policies to improve post-secondary education.

2.0 The Importance of Post-Secondary Education

To gauge overall sentiment towards post-secondary education in Ontario, respondents were asked to rank, in general terms, how important they felt post-secondary education would be to the prosperity of Ontario over the next 20 years. These results are displayed below in Figure 2.0

As hypothesized, a vast majority (91%) indicated that post-secondary education would be either very or somewhat important. While there was little variation between demographic subgroups, those with less education were less likely to rank post-secondary education as very important: 72% of those with a university education responded 'very important', compared to 67% with college or some university, and 57% with high school or less.

Figure 2.0: How important is Ontario's post-secondary education system to the quality of life and economic prosperity of the province over the next 20 years?

(n=1,001, weighted)

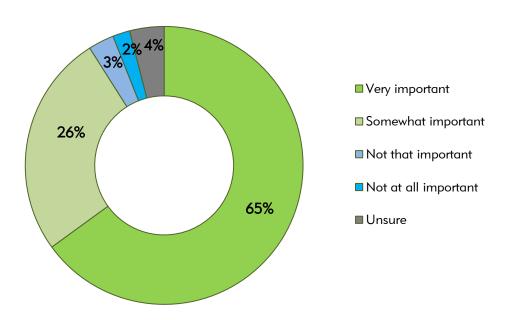
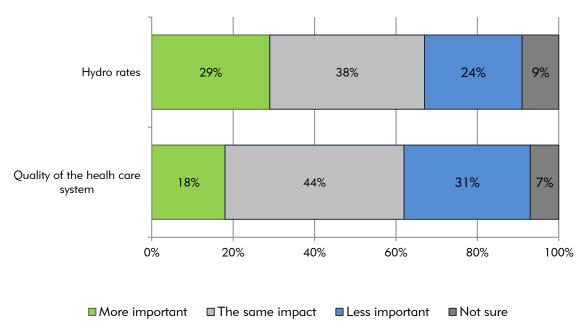


Figure 2.1: Do you think Ontario's post secondary education system is more important, less important, or has the same impact on Ontario's quality of life and economic prosperity as the following...? (n=1,001, weighted)



In order to focus on the relative importance of education to other current provincial issues, respondents were asked to compare hydro rates and the quality of the health care system with post-secondary education.

2.1 Education versus Hydro Rates

While 29% of respondents felt that post-secondary education was more important than hydro rates, in terms of protecting Ontario's quality of life and economic prosperity, older Ontarians were twice as likely as 18 to 29 year-olds to find education less important than hydro rates. Just 12% of the millennial demographic (18 to 29) felt education was less important, compared to 24% of those 30 to 44, 25% of those 45 to 60, and 31% of those 60 and over.

2.2 Education versus Health Care

Health care is an area of high importance to many Ontarians and consistently ranks in the top two of most important issues. It is therefore not surprising that only 18% of respondents believed that post-secondary education is more important than health care to Ontario's long-term prosperity. However, a plurality (44%) of respondents indicated that post-secondary education is just as important as health care when it comes to Ontario's future prosperity and economic health. Together, these results show that a majority (62%) of Ontarians feel that the post-secondary education system is at least as important as the health care system.

As was the case in Section 2.1, the millennial demographic (18-29 year olds) and those earning less than \$35,000 per year were the most likely to believe that post-secondary was more important however neither were majority opinions.

3.0 Testing Statements on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario

In this section of the survey, respondents were shown a series of statements relating to post-secondary education and asked to what degree they either agreed or disagreed with each. The objective of these statements was to test the effectiveness of different messages relating to teacher training, tuition fees, and taxpayer funding of education. Below, Figure 3.0 displays the overall breakdown of support for each statement asked.

3.1 Student Debt Loads in Ontario

In terms of tuition fees, 74% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "students in Ontario have to borrow too much money to pay for their post-secondary education". These results were strongly related to both age and income. Younger Canadians (45%) were much more likely to strongly agree than any other age group. Meanwhile, 24% of 30 to 44 year olds, 34% of 45 to 60 year olds, and 27% of those over 60 strongly agreed. Results were inversely related to household income. As income increased, the likelihood of strong agreeing with the statement decreased. The survey found that 45% of those earning less than \$35,000 strongly agreed, compared with 37% of those earning \$35,000 to \$50,000, 31% of those earning \$50,001 to \$75,000, 29% of those earning \$75,001 to \$100,000, and 21% of those earning over \$100,000.

3.2 Higher Taxes for More Post-Secondary Spending

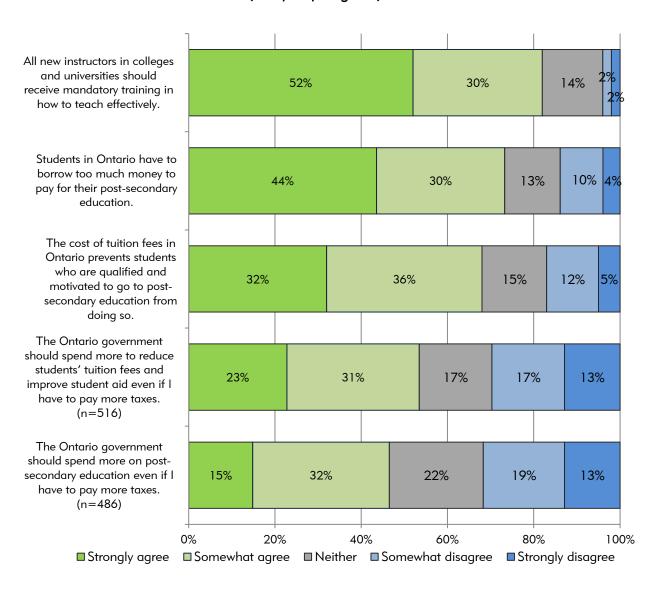
In order to test the support for directing public funds toward post-secondary education, a split sample was implemented to show two different, but related, statements to half the respondents. Roughly one half of respondents were shown one of the two statements. The objective of such an exercise is to see whether the language used changes the public's reaction to the statements.

Statement 1: "The Ontario government should spend more on post-secondary education even if I have to pay more taxes."

Statement 2: "The Ontario government should spend more to reduce students' tuition fees and improve student aid even if I have to pay more taxes."

Respondents were measurably more likely to agree with statement two, suggesting that the qualifying message of reducing the debt burden on students and improving aid is more positively received than simply increasing funding to post-secondary institutions. When specifics such as reducing student debt and improving student aid are identified, respondents are more likely to agree with the statement.

Towhat extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=1,001, weighted)



3.3 Mandatory Instructor Training

A large majority of respondents (82%) either strongly (52%) or somewhat agreed (30%) that all new instructors at colleges and universities should receive mandatory training on how to teach effectively. Only 4% of respondents disagreed with the statement. There was little variation on the question across subgroups.

3.4 Tuition Fees as Barriers to Accessing Post-Secondary Education

Over two in three Ontarians surveyed (68%) either strongly or somewhat agreed that the cost of tuition fees in Ontario prevents students who are qualified and motivated to go to post-secondary education from doing so. Only 21% of Ontarians surveyed disagreed with the statement.

Agreement was highest among younger Ontarians (73%) and among those who live in households that make less than \$35,000 per year (77%).

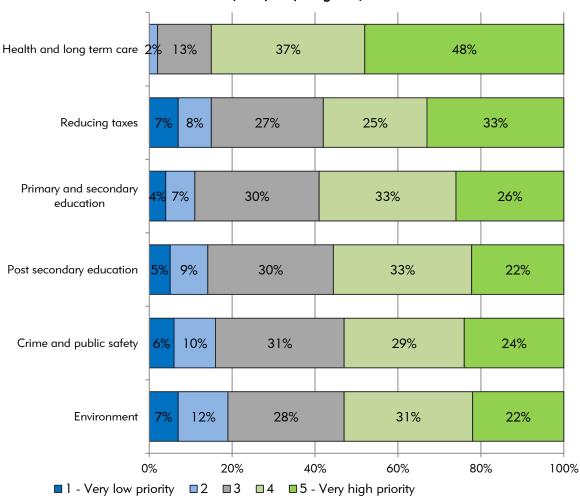
Although lower income respondents were more likely to agree with the statement, a majority of respondents whose household incomes were over \$100,000 (61%) either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement indicating that tuition fees are seen as a barrier to accessing post-secondary education even among those with higher incomes.

Finally, women were somewhat more likely to agree with the statement than men (women 71%, men 64%).

4.0 Ranking Spending Priorities

To develop a clearer understanding of where Ontarians place their priorities in terms of public spending, respondents were presented with a list policy areas and were asked to rank each on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being low priority and 5 being very high priority. Figure 4.0 below displays the overall results.

Figure 4.0: On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being a very low priority and 5 being a very high priority—how much of a priority should each of the following be in terms of spending (n=1,001, weighted)



The chart above is sorted from highest to lowest by the 'very high priority' score and reports that post-secondary education was seen as less of a priority than other issues listed. Health care was by far the top priority for most respondents.

Although respondents were less likely to rate post-secondary education as a high priority for spending, a majority of respondents still considered post-secondary education to be a high priority while only 14% considered it to be a low priority.

Respondents were also asked to rank each policy area from most important to least important when it comes to spending. Health care remained the top spending priority but when forced to make a trade off between different options, post-secondary education was ranked 4th on average ahead of crime and public safety and the environment.

Figure 4.1: Please rank the following policy areas from most important to least important in terms of spending by the provincial government.

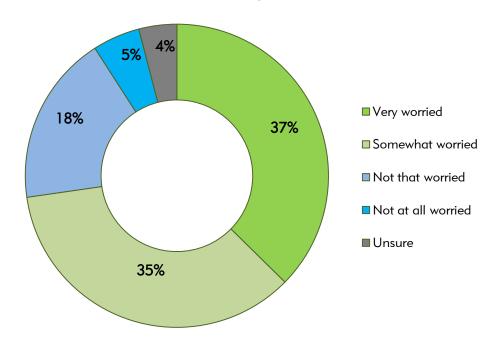
Priority	Spending Area	Average Rank
1	Health and long-term care	2.33
2	Reducing taxes	2.96
3	Crime and public safety	3.72
4	Post-secondary education	3.87
5	Primary and secondary education	4.00
6	Environment	4.11

5.0 Worry about Paying for PSE

Those respondents who reported having children under the age of 18 living in their households were asked to what extent they were worried about the future costs of education. Overall, a clear majority of respondents (72%) were very or somewhat worried about being able to afford their children's education.

Figure 5.0: To what extent are you worried that you won't be able to help pay for your child or children's post-secondary education?

(n=302, weighted)



While there was some variation across demographic groups, an area of particular interest was income level. Not surprisingly, respondents reporting lower household income levels were more likely to be very worried about their ability to contribute to their children's educations. However, even among those with household incomes between \$75,000 and \$100,000, 31% were very worried and 55% were somewhat worried.

6.0 Methodology

The purpose of public opinion research is to measure attitudes and behaviours of a study population within reliable and acceptable statistical margins of accuracy.

Survey Administration

The survey was conducted online with 1,002 respondents in English using an internet survey platform licensed by Abacus Data. A random sample of panelists was invited to participate in the survey from a larger internet panel of over 150,000 Canadians.

The survey was completed between September 9 and 12, 2011.

Steps were taken to ensure that the survey respondents were representative of the population of Ontario over 18 years of age. Quotas were set to match the distribution of actual census data for age, gender, and education level. Moreover, statistical weighting was applied to the data after the completion of the survey for age, gender, region, education, and past provincial vote.

Respondents were informed of the purpose of the research, that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that all information provided would remain confidential.

Sample Distribution

A sample of 1,001 drawn from the population of Ontario would be expected to provide results accurate to within plus or minus 3.1 percent in 95 out of 100 samples. Since a random sample was not generated for this project, there is technically no margin of error. However, the margin of error for this project is comparable to plus or minus 3.1 percent. Readers should be cautious of making conclusions from smaller sub-samples.

Region	Unweighted Count (All Respondents)	Weighted Count (All respondents)
Eastern Ontario	168	150
Greater Toronto Area (including Simcoe and Hamilton/Niagara)	343	400
Northern Ontario	93	70
Southwestern Ontario	190	173
Metro Toronto	208	207
Total	1,002	1,001