



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

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May 11, 2020

Assistant Deputy Minister Kelly Shields
Postsecondary Education Division, Ministry of Colleges and Universities
16th Floor
315 Front St W
Toronto, ON M7A 0B8

Cc:

Deputy Minister Laurie LeBlanc
Minister Ross Romano
Minister Rod Phillips

**Re: OUSA Submission to the Ontario Jobs & Recovery Committee:
MCU Advisory Council**

Dear ADM Shields,

On behalf of 150,000 professional and undergraduate students in Ontario, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is pleased to provide our written submission to the Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share student concerns and recommendations on how to best support students during this global pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is ever-changing and as such requires strong, collaborative action from all levels of government. We encourage the provincial government to continue to work with the federal government to ensure that students receive the support they need and to continue to seek meaningful consultations with students.

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on students attending or preparing to attend a post-secondary institution in Ontario. Over the past two months, students have done their best to complete their academic year through distance learning, all while struggling to secure summer employment and plan for their future. Many students are unsure if they will receive the financial aid they need to pay rent and buy groceries over the summer months, and are uncertain as to whether they will have the funds required to attend university in September.

The provincial government should focus on ensuring students have the support they need to address their financial concerns and return to school this Fall. Students also need comprehensive information regarding access timelines and eligibility requirements for support programs like the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB).

OUSA is encouraged by the recent suspension of OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual, as well as the federal government's \$9 billion relief package, which included the introduction of the CESB. However, there continues to be gaps in eligibility for CESB and, as of May 11th, funds from CESB have yet to be distributed and applications have yet to open. This is concerning as affordability continues to be an issue, particularly for vulnerable students. As CESB is implemented, the provincial government can play an important role in filling eligibility gaps by ensuring that vulnerable students are provided equitable financial support. For example, many international students need financial support, yet they are not eligible for CESB and may be less likely to meet the eligibility requirements for CERB. The government needs to work with institutions to ensure that vulnerable students receive financial assistance, especially if they are not eligible for federal funding.

Students are also increasingly worried about the quality of their education and support services if their upcoming academic year is offered exclusively online. Although institutions have worked hard to facilitate distance learning and final assessments virtually to complete the Spring semester, more needs to be done to prepare for an online Fall 2020 semester. Faculty and staff need to ensure that their course offerings are comprehensive, high-quality, and accessible to all. Rural and northern students need to have access to broadband and relevant learning tools. Students in disciplines that require mandatory placements (nursing, social work, education) and work-integrated learning opportunities need guidance on how they will be able to meet these requirements in an adapted learning environment. Academic, financial aid, career counselling, mental health, and gender-based violence supports need to be enhanced during this time of uncertainty and increased vulnerability. As COVID-19 exacerbates institutional budgets, we must ensure that these essential services are protected and are able to adapt to continue to support the needs of students.

As the post-secondary sector plans for the upcoming academic year, it needs to prioritize predictability and transparency for students. Students understand that there are many options being considered for how to slowly re-open post-secondary institutions and that these decisions need to follow public health guidelines. However, students also need ample time to plan for their upcoming year: signing leasing, finalizing travel plans, finding part-time employment, and determining and securing needed academic accommodations. As individual institutions finalize their plans for the 2020-2021 academic year, they need to clearly and promptly communicate with students so that students can make informed decisions.

Government, institutions, and sector stakeholders have an opportunity to find creative ways to stimulate the economy through investments in students and post-secondary education. For example, encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises to create co-op and paid internships for students provides these enterprises with a strong labour pool to support innovative business models to transition in a post-COVID economy, while simultaneously preparing students for the workforce and ensuring they are financially independent. Extending the moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual to create a 2-year grace period gives graduates the opportunity to find meaningful employment and contribute to the economy, instead of being overwhelmed by student debt. University students, faculty, staff, and administrations have stepped up in this fight against COVID-19 and with the support of the government, will continue to do so.

Students need financial support, predictability, and clear communication so that they can make informed decisions about their educational journey. As students wait to apply for and receive funds from CESB, the provincial government needs to ensure that students are not falling through the cracks. The provincial government and institutions must step up and fill in the gaps, whether it be through OSAP enhancements or institutional student financial aid. As each institution plans for their Fall term, students need to be given clear information as soon as possible so they can make informed decisions about their upcoming year. As the COVID-19 situation progresses, we encourage the provincial government to continue to consult with students on their perspectives and solutions for addressing ongoing concerns in the post-secondary system.

OUSA's Recommendations

We have highlighted the following recommendations from our policy library, which seek to provide solutions to the challenges students have faced as a result of COVID-19.

Predictable Domestic & International Student Tuition & University Funding:

1. The provincial government should freeze tuition across all programs while increasing operating grants until students are contributing approximately one-third of universities' total operating budget.
2. To ensure tuition rates are predictable for incoming students, the provincial government should regulate international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of five percent per year to match institutionally set limitations. Additionally, the provincial government should regulate in-cohort increases to international tuition at a maximum of three percent per year.

Increasing Student Financial Aid:

1. The provincial government should extend the current moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual for 2 years.
2. The provincial government should eliminate expected parental, spousal, and individual contributions in the OSAP calculation to ensure students have the financial supports to go back to school.
3. The provincial government should establish, in its tuition protocol, an international tuition set-aside at the same 10% rate of the domestic set-aside, with funds raised directed specifically to needs-based financial aid for international students
4. The provincial government should increase non-refundable grants for students who need additional financial assistance to start or continue their post-secondary education in 2020-2021

Enhancing Support Services:

1. The provincial government should mandate that each institution's Sexual Violence Prevention & Response office or equivalent should administer the allocation of the Campus Safety Grant.
2. The provincial government should provide increased and continuous funding for community-based sexual assault centres and rape crisis centres.
3. The provincial government should increase funding for campus-based mental health services and supports, such as peer-to-peer programming, frontline counselling services and preventive and early intervention supports.

Stimulating Economy & Creative Solutions:

1. The government should provide financial incentives for the development of entrepreneurial hubs, incubators, and start-up initiatives on university campuses.
2. The provincial government should re-invest \$68 million over three years in the Career Ready Fund to incentivize employers to create more job opportunities for students and recent graduates.

Sincerely,
The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA)