



## INTERIM POLICY PAPER

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*Responding to COVID-19*

Fall 2020

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## ABOUT OUSA

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OUSA represents the interests of 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations 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.

The member institutions and home office of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance operate on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Leni-Lunaape, Anishnawbek, and Mississauga peoples.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on our province, including students. Students have been impacted in all aspects of life, from academics, to employment, health and safety, financial security, and mental health and wellness. Students are facing new challenges, and pre-existing concerns have been exacerbated by increased health risks and necessary public health measures including the need to isolate and maintain social distancing. To address the current and emerging impacts of COVID-19 and ensure students are supported in recovery efforts, students have come together to identify concerns and offer the following recommendations.

### THE PROBLEM

#### ***Inadequate Student Financial Aid***

Many students are concerned about how to pay for, or continue paying for, post-secondary education. Student, graduate, and parental employment have been affected by COVID-19, reducing individuals' and families' income and ability to afford post-secondary education and raising concerns about student loan payback. This is exacerbated for students from low income families or rural/northern communities who may not be able to afford reliable technology or access to dependable internet to support the online learning methods necessary to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19.

The current student financial aid framework is insufficient to address students' financial concerns. For example: expected financial contributions included in the OSAP calculation do not account for economic disruptions that affect the income level of students and their support systems; OSAP currently puts students on probation for dropping over 40 percent of courses, making them ineligible for OSAP those terms, even when living costs remain the same; and OSAP requires students complete their degree within a certain time period and does not account for delays as a result of COVID-19. Without adequate financial support, students may be unable to afford items such as healthy food or safe living conditions as a result of the high cost of post-secondary education.

#### ***Poor Quality and Inaccessible Online Learning***

Given the rapid transition to remote delivery, institutions are unable to provide a high-quality online learning environment. There are further concerns about accessibility as online lectures and assignments may not be accessible to students and students are not able to easily access accommodation aids or time-zone specific accommodations. Students may also be charged additional fees associated with the costs of online course delivery, and students with disabilities may not be aware of or qualify for funding through the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities for services and equipment they previously accessed on campus.

Access is also a concern for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or in rural and northern settings who may not have access to reliable internet and other technology to support remote learning.

Proctoring and other surveillance or assessment tools used by universities present the potential for serious privacy and security concerns for students, including how data is collected and retained, and students uncomfortable or unwilling to consent to the use of such tools may not have alternative options available. Ultimately, proctoring, surveillance or assessment tools, and unnecessarily complicated requirements for assessment act as barriers to student success by causing increased stress and a decrease in performance.

#### ***Lack of a Coordinated Institutional Response***

The provincial government is not appropriately prioritizing students in coordinating COVID-19 recovery plans, despite the fact that the effects of COVID-19 on students and their post-secondary institutions will be long-lasting and unpredictable. The provincial government is not providing consistent direction for post-secondary institutions in areas where it could be beneficial, leaving open the possibility for overly aggressive opening timelines and poor-quality remote delivery of courses. This is exacerbated by the fact

that the provincial government has decreased its contributions to university operating budgets by seven percentage points over the last four years.

### ***Barriers to Access***

Changes to secondary education systems may not adequately prioritize students' ability to pursue post-secondary education, as many students may be focusing their limited energy on adapting learning experiences to an online medium.

### ***Risks to Student Health and Safety***

Certain populations, including immunocompromised people and those with chronic medical conditions, have a higher risk of COVID-19 and severe health outcomes, and return-to-campus protocols may not adequately consider the accommodations and health precautions necessary for students to pursue a high-quality post-secondary education. Further, students continuing to study remotely due to COVID-19 health risks may not have adequate access to learning and work-integrated learning opportunities.

### ***Limited Employment Opportunities***

Employment opportunities, including experiential learning opportunities, have been negatively affected by the necessary responses to COVID-19. This is concerning as lack of experiential learning opportunities may affect access to employment opportunities following graduation. Where experiential learning opportunities do persist, they may be negatively affected by remote attendance.

### ***Impact on International Students***

The high cost of international tuition acts as a barrier for international students to access post-secondary education in Ontario, and barriers specific to international student participation will negatively affect university operating budgets. Some international students may be in Canada unable to travel home, work or continue their studies due to program changes. International students may also face additional difficulties gaining post-graduation work experience and achieve permanent residency due to the current job market.

### ***Impact on Students with Caregiver Responsibilities***

COVID-19 and related public safety measures have exacerbated the already high cost of caregiving and further reduced the already limited spots within child care. Caregivers are not adequately supported for the care-related work they do, and have taken on, as a result of COVID-19 and access to provincial funding and support is complicated and time-consuming. Student caregivers can face additional financial burdens where they are unable to move due to COVID-19-related caregiving responsibilities and are forced to pay to break a lease or pay rent on a property they cannot access.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ***Enhancing Student Financial Aid***

The provincial government should review its student financial aid for the 2020-2021 year to assess opportunities for temporary spending to students with greater net financial need. Additionally, the provincial government should improve OSAP by: increasing grants for students who need additional financial assistance to start or continue post-secondary education; implementing a moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual, lasting a minimum of 2 years after graduation; lowering the rate of interest on OSAP loans to match Canada's prime rates following the moratorium; eliminating expected parental, spousal and individual contributions in the OSAP calculation; and suspending OSAP academic probation based on dropping courses and OSAP time limitations for a minimum of 2 years, pending review of the pandemic and post-secondary education system.

The provincial government should also introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to students on a need basis who require additional support to access internet and technology necessary for online learning. Additionally, the provincial government should develop a Student Benefits Package for students who demonstrate financial need throughout the school year.

### ***Improving the Quality and Accessibility of Online Learning***

The provincial government should match institution funding towards supporting online learning and remote delivery and ensure that directives on online course delivery mandate that institutions are not allowed to download costs associated with online course delivery onto students through additional course fees.

To increase accessibility, the provincial government should provide funding to institutions to hire staff and implement online learning features to optimize accessibility of online learning according to Universal Design for Learning principles. They should further expand access to the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities, including waiving the requirement for students to have applied for the Ontario Student Assistance Program, and create a strategy aimed at improving the promotion of the grant and streamlining the process to reduce the wait time for receiving funding. Additionally, the provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or in rural and northern settings, are appropriately prioritized in the government's investment in broadband internet.

To ensure quality, the Ontario University Council on Quality Assurance should expand Institutional Quality Assurance Processes requirements to include program delivery criteria for online courses, and include an assessment of online learning in its Final Assessment Report. The provincial government should also expand existing regulations and implement guidelines to specifically address the privacy and security concerns of proctoring, other online assessment tools that require students to provide access to computer functions, and any institution-specific assessment processes, in order to ensure the consistency and quality of assessments and that any data collected is secure in terms of storage, access, retention and use. They should further make funding available to institutions for training and staffing costs necessary to implement alternative forms of learning assessments that do not use proctoring and other online assessment tools.

### ***Implementing a Coordinated Institutional Response***

The provincial government should make investments and take key strategic action to coordinate the response of the post-secondary system by providing: application-based grant funding to institutions to support increased, evidence-based technological needs resulting from remote delivery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; directives to consistently coordinate under which conditions universities may re-open to create a safe and high-quality learning environment based on evidence-based pedagogical practices and public health directives; and envelope funding to institutions to support pandemic-associated costs based on need.

### ***Increasing Access***

The provincial government should support secondary students to be able to access post-secondary by providing grant funding to support supplemental academic programming for incoming students and temporary instructive directives to universities to establish standard approaches to admissions processes and determinations, in consultation with the Council of Ontario Universities.

### ***Ensuring Student Health and Safety***

When universities resume in-person classes, the provincial government should provide directives for universities to incorporate course delivery standards according to Universal Design principles to ensure that students studying remotely can still access the same quality of post-secondary education as their peers. To support students who are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19, or those in close contact

with high-risk populations, the Ontario Human Rights Commission should develop a policy on accommodating students in post-secondary education and experiential learning opportunities accounting for the increased health risks posed by COVID-19 and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide additional funding and support for institutions and employers to create and accommodate for remote work-integrated learning opportunities to ensure equitable access for students.

### ***Creating Employment Opportunities***

To ensure students are able to access employment and experiential learning opportunities, the provincial government should expand funding to the Summer Employment Opportunities Program, Youth Job Connection Program, Ontario Internship Program, and other Ontario Public Service programs that employ university students and recent graduates. When transitioning from majority online to majority in-person Ontario civil service jobs, the provincial government should prioritize its own online civil service student positions for students with immunocompromised status. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should solicit and fund experiential learning proposals from Ontario's universities that are awaiting funding.

The provincial government should convene a working group of provincial accrediting bodies, and cooperate with other Canadian governments to convene a working group of national accrediting bodies, to discuss a unified approach work-integrated accreditation requirements. Additionally, they should commission research on how to effectively build experiential learning opportunities in a remote environment.

### ***Supporting International Students***

To prevent universities using international student tuition to address COVID-19-related shortfalls, the provincial government should regulate international tuition at a maximum increase of 5 percent per year to avoid pandemic-driven tuition hikes, and provide limited compensatory grants to cover revenue shortfalls. Additionally, the provincial government should increase operating funding directed to institutions to assist in making up shortfalls as a result of COVID-19 drops in enrollment so that international students are not unduly burdened with these costs.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should liaise with the federal Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to help willing students achieve permanent residency in Ontario after graduation to avoid barriers raised by COVID-19, and the provincial government should implement an exception system to allow students to work while they cannot progress their studies as a result of COVID-19.

### ***Supporting Students with Caregiver Responsibilities***

To support students with caregiver responsibilities, the provincial government should develop an emergency grant to subsidize the cost of care, create a provincial care program, aimed at providing caregivers with comprehensive, accessible and affordable care for dependents, and develop a benefits package for caregivers to support them for the caregiving work and responsibilities they take on.

The provincial government should also develop a centralized resource database and application website that allows students to apply to all eligible provincial funding at once; and amend the *Residential Tenancies Act* to make it easier for caregivers who have had to move or are unable to return to their unit due to changing caregiving responsibilities to end a tenancy early.

## INTRODUCTION

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When Ontario saw its first cases of COVID-19 in March 2020, universities across the province were quick to respond to public health guidance by shutting down physical campuses and spaces and shifting to emergency online learning as students finished the final weeks of their semesters. This sudden shift, much like similar shifts beyond the post-secondary sector, caused major disruptions and raised a number of concerns for students. Students were not only focused on protecting their health and safety and the health and safety of their families and neighbours – they were doing so while learning and taking final exams in a new medium, one that did not have the foundation needed to deliver education of the same quality or accessibility. This was accompanied by growing anxiety and mental health challenges, along with financial worries as people lost jobs, and employment opportunities narrowed.

Over the summer, students waited to see what would happen when they returned to their campuses in the fall. Unlike the decisions in March 2020, universities were slower to make final decisions as to whether or not physical and in-person campuses, classes, and services would be open. Access and transparency around student financial assistance was delayed. And students continued to navigate the health and safety concerns along with the rest of Ontarians. Without clear direction, many students had to make difficult and uninformed decisions, signing leases, putting their education on hold, or dropping out altogether as a result of barriers to access, affordability, and quality.

When institutions began announcing that Fall 2020 semesters would be primarily virtual, students began preparing for what would prove to be a difficult transition. Classes began, and services started up in limited capacities. Students and new graduates continued to struggle financially without the support of income from cancelled summer employment and the end of the Canada Emergency Student Benefit and a resumption of interest accrual on student loans. We also heard countless stories from students who were concerned about the quality and accessibility of online learning which had seen little improvements since the Winter 2020 semester.

Over these past eight months, OUSA has proposed a number of recommendations to address the concerns and challenges that students have faced, and will continue to face throughout the pandemic and in its aftermath. To this end, the OUSA Steering Committee made an important decision in September 2020 to introduce a policy stance that would offer system-wide, comprehensive recommendations to address new and exacerbated concerns, specifically in the context of COVID-19. The following policy paper is the result of these efforts, written and ratified by OUSA students in the Fall of 2020. The recommendations herein are meant to address student concerns at the time of writing, acknowledging that we cannot predict the trajectory of the pandemic and its impact on students. Therefore, while this policy paper has received approval for the next two years, it will be revisited and revised as needed to be able to respond to student needs in order to ensure all students are supported by their institutions and the province as we navigate this challenging time and work on recovery efforts in the future.

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted students in all aspects of life, from academics, to employment, health and safety, financial security, and mental health and wellness. Students are facing new challenges, and pre-existing concerns have been exacerbated by increased health risks and necessary public health measures including the need to isolate and maintain social distancing. As is made clear in this policy paper, there a number of areas that have not received the attention or support students require to. The recommendations made offer student-driven, evidence-based solutions to a number of the concerns students have identified.

However, it is also important to acknowledge there are some foundational supports in place that will need to be continued throughout the pandemic and while students navigate the after-effects of COVID-19. These measures should also be continuously monitored for their effectiveness and expanded as needed in response to the new and changing needs that will arise in response to the changing landscape.

Specifically, in response to exacerbated mental health concerns, the provincial government invested \$19.25 million into mental health supports for post-secondary students. This was a welcomed investment, recognizing that students, who are particularly vulnerable to mental illness,<sup>1</sup> are facing additional mental health concerns as a result of the pandemic: 70 percent of respondents to a survey conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations reported feeling stressed, anxious, or isolated due to the pandemic, and 82 percent reported worrying about their future beyond the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

There are also some measures in place that can alleviate student housing concerns, notably the cost of rent and the inability to leave a lease signed prior to the pandemic and the shift to predominately online learning.<sup>3</sup> Notably, Bill 204, *Helping Tenants and Small Businesses Act* introduced a rent freeze for 2021 which protects tenants from rent increases, including those previously permitted under subsection 120(3) of the *Residential Tenancies Act*.<sup>4</sup>

For these students, as well as students who are currently in unsafe living situations due to the increased risk of domestic violence caused by the pandemic,<sup>5</sup> there is emergency assistance available through the provincial government. This funding is available to those who have been affected by COVID-19, are being evicted from their home, are in or leaving an abusive relationship, or are otherwise worried about their safety.<sup>6</sup>

It will be important that these supports be amended and expanded as the pandemic continues and as students navigate the after effects of COVID-19. OUSA hopes that the provincial government acknowledge and respond to these areas of concern and continue to make investments that will ensure that students feel supported and safe in their homes and in their minds.

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<sup>1</sup> See, Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario, College Student Alliance, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. *In It Together 2020: Foundations for Promoting Mental Wellness in Campus Communities*. Toronto, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Students Are Still Worried: COVID-19 and Post Secondary Education* (Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, 2020), online: [https://www.casa-acae.com/students\\_are\\_still\\_worried\\_covid19](https://www.casa-acae.com/students_are_still_worried_covid19).

<sup>3</sup> Pat Foran, “Students learning online still expected to pay rent if they signed a lease,” *CTV News*, August 13, 2020, online: <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/students-learning-online-still-expected-to-pay-rent-if-they-signed-a-lease-1.5063606>.

<sup>4</sup> Bill 204, *An Act to amend various Acts respecting municipal elections, to amend the Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020 and to provide for a temporary residential rent freeze and specified temporary protections for certain commercial tenants*, 1st sess., 42nd Legislature, 2020, SO ch. 23. [https://www.ola.org/sites/default/files/node-files/bill/document/pdf/2020/2020-10/b204ra\\_e\\_o.pdf](https://www.ola.org/sites/default/files/node-files/bill/document/pdf/2020/2020-10/b204ra_e_o.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Megan L. Evans, Margo Lindauer, and Maureen E. Farrell, “A Pandemic within a Pandemic – Intimate Partner Violence during COVID-19,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Perspective (16 September 2020). doi: 10.1056/NEJMp2024046.

<sup>6</sup> “Apply for Emergency Assistance,” *Government of Ontario*, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/apply-emergency-assistance>.

## STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

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**Principle:** High-quality education should be accessible to all willing and qualified students, regardless of socioeconomic status.

**Principle:** Student financial aid should be responsive to changes in student financial need and means.

**Principle:** Students should feel financially supported and able to access post-secondary education, without the concern of being unable to pay back future loans as a result of economic or income disruptions beyond their control.

**Principle:** Post-secondary education funding, such as OSAP, should not be influenced by financial contributions from others, such as parents, guardians, etc., that can often be precarious or unreliable.

**Principle:** All formats of learning, including online or remote learning, should be accessible to all students, regardless of income level or geographic location.

**Principle:** Students should not be cut off from accessing OSAP now or in the future as a result of dropping courses due to COVID-19.

**Principle:** Students should not be cut off from accessing OSAP now or in the future as a result of timing out of OSAP due to COVID-19.

**Principle:** Students should be able to afford healthy lifestyles, including access to food, safe living conditions, and transport, while in school.

**Concern:** Many students are concerned about how to pay for, or continue paying for, post-secondary education.

**Concern:** Student and parental employment have been affected by COVID-19, reducing individuals' and families' income and ability to afford post-secondary education.

**Concern:** Many students are concerned about how they will pay back their student loans due to the unstable nature of the employment market.

**Concern:** Expected financial contributions included in the OSAP calculation do not account for economic disruptions that affect the income level of students and their support systems.

**Concern:** Students from low income families or rural/northern communities may not be able to afford reliable technology or access to dependable internet to support the online learning methods necessary to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19.

**Concern:** OSAP currently puts students on probation for dropping over 40 percent of courses, making them ineligible for OSAP those terms, even when living costs remain the same.

**Concern:** OSAP requires students complete their degree within a certain time period, however some students may be unable to meet that time period as a result of COVID-19.

**Concern:** Students may be unable to afford items such as healthy food or safe living conditions as a result of the high cost of post-secondary education.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should increase grants through OSAP for students who need additional financial assistance to start or continue post-secondary education.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should review its student financial aid for the 2020-2021 year to assess opportunities for temporary spending to students with greater net financial need.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should implement a moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual, lasting a minimum of 2 years after graduation.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should lower the rate of interest on OSAP loans to match Canada's prime rates after a minimum 2 year moratorium.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should eliminate expected parental, spousal and individual contributions in the OSAP calculation to ensure students have the financial support to return to post-secondary education.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to students on a need basis who require additional support to access internet and technology necessary for online learning.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should suspend OSAP probation based on dropping courses for a minimum of 2 years, pending review of the pandemic and post-secondary education system.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should suspend OSAP time limitations for a minimum of 2 years, pending review of the pandemic and post-secondary education.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop a Student Benefits Package for students who demonstrate financial need throughout the school year.

The lack of job opportunities for recent graduates has raised concerns for both recent and prospective graduates, including concerns related to the ability to make OSAP payments. Students who have or will graduate should not be penalized for an inability to make payments on OSAP loans during an economically unstable time where the unemployment rate for recent graduates has reached a record high – increasing from 10.3 percent in February 2020, to 29.4 percent following the first-wave of the pandemic in Ontario in May 2020.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing this concern, the provincial government should implement a moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual, lasting a minimum of 2 years after graduation. Following this moratorium, the provincial government should lower the rate of interest on OSAP loans to match Canada's prime rates so that the provincial government is not generating revenue off of student debt and ensure newly employed graduates are able to engage in financial planning and make regular interest payments on their student debt.<sup>8</sup>

The economic impacts of COVID-19 have also meant that many individuals, including students and their support systems have experienced income disruptions. However, OSAP calculations continue to factor expected parental, spousal and individual contributions, starting at \$3,600 for the 2020-2021 academic year.<sup>9</sup> These expected contribution calculations do not account for economic disruptions or changing financial need. Including expected financial contributions that do not account for changing financial need in calculations determining OSAP funding can exclude students from accessing necessary financial support. To account for income disruptions, the provincial government should eliminate expected parental, spousal and individual contributions in the OSAP calculation. Eliminating expected financial contributions would ensure students have the financial support to access and return to post-secondary education.<sup>10</sup>

The economic impacts of COVID-19 have also impacted many students' and prospective students' plans for post-secondary education, specifically as it affects their savings. Income disruptions can mean that money saved for post-secondary education may have been needed for necessities other than education.

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<sup>7</sup> "Study: Potential earnings losses among high school and postsecondary graduates due to the COVID-19 economic downturn," *Statistics Canada - The Daily*, July 28, 2020, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200728/dq200728a-eng.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Read more about OUSA's stance on student financial aid and interest in Stephanie Bertolo, Matthew Gerrits, Connor Plante, and Tasneem Warwani, *Policy Paper: Student Financial Aid* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2019), 36-37.

<sup>9</sup> "OSAP Definitions," *Government of Ontario*, accessed September 30, 2020, online: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/osap-definitions#section-15>.

<sup>10</sup> Read more about OUSA's stance on expected contributions in Bertolo, Gerrits, Plante, and Warwani, *Student Financial Aid*, 17-21.

This is a real concern for students, as 73 percent had “indicated that they were very or extremely concerned about using up their savings” prior to the announcement of the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), and 61 percent were concerned following the announcement – this does not account for how students are feeling following the end of CESB funding in September 2020.<sup>11</sup> This is further exacerbated by the fact that many students either lost job opportunities, had a delayed start, or had reduced hours over the summer of 2020.<sup>12</sup> Summer income is often a significant source of funding for students’ education and other related costs throughout the school year. To recognize these income and employment disruptions, the provincial government should increase grants through OSAP for students who need additional financial assistance to start or continue post-secondary education. Additionally, the provincial government should develop a Student Benefits Package for students with demonstrated financial need to support their ability to pay for related educational expenses, such as housing, food, books, and transit throughout their academic term (see more below). These investments should be implemented alongside a review of provincially-funded student financial aid for the 2020-2021 year to assess opportunities for temporary spending to students with greater net financial need.

As universities have shifted to online and remote delivery options of courses, students who do not have access to reliable technology and/or internet connections now face additional financial costs. For many students, especially those from low-income families or who live in rural and/or northern communities, accessing technology or reliable internet connections can be an insurmountable cost.<sup>13</sup> To address these concerns and support post-secondary students, the provincial government should introduce a grant through OSAP, targeted to students who need additional financial assistance in order to access technology or internet necessary for online/remote learning.

As a result of COVID-19, students have been reducing their course loads as a way to accommodate new schedules, learning styles, care work, and more. However, students who access OSAP are put on OSAP academic probation” if they drop more than 40 percent of their course load. This means students may have to continue taking courses they do not want to take online or are unable to manage because of a change in priorities. As students change their course loads and manage the changing landscape, it is likely that they may take longer to complete their post-secondary education. Students should not be penalized for taking longer to complete their education due to COVID-19. To address these emerging concerns, the provincial government should suspend OSAP academic probation as a result of dropping courses for a minimum of 2 years, pending review. This review would assess the current climate of both the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., are places in lockdown, what is caseload, is there a vaccine, etc.) and post-secondary education systems (i.e., are the majority of classes happening online). In addition to suspending OSAP academic probation, the provincial government should suspend the time limits on OSAP funding – current time limits to complete programs are 340 weeks total or 520 weeks total for students with disabilities – for a minimum of 2 years, pending a review of the COVID-19 pandemic and post-secondary education.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, students continue to deal with the high cost of post-secondary education and cost of living,<sup>15</sup> making a healthy and safe lifestyle increasingly difficult or inaccessible to those from lower-

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<sup>11</sup> “Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students,” *Statistics Canada - The Daily*, May 12, 2020, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200512/dq200512a-eng.htm?utm>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Cirtwill and Emma Helfand-Green, “Broadband Infrastructure for the Future: Connecting Rural Ontario to the Digital Economy,” in *Rural Ontario Foresight Papers 2017 Broadband Infrastructure for the Future* (Guelph, ON: Rural Ontario Institute, 2017), 24.

<sup>14</sup> “Learn About OSAP,” *Government of Ontario*, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/learn-about-osap#section-1>.

<sup>15</sup> Domestic undergraduate tuition can cost Ontario students up to \$11,420: “Tuition Fees by University,” Universities Canada, accessed September 29, 2020, online: <https://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/tuition-fees-by-university/>; The cost of a one bedroom unit in London, Ontario increased by \$138 from 2015 to 2019: Statistics Canada, *Table 34-10-0133-01 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, average rents for areas with a population of 10,000 and over*, accessed September 29, 2020, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3410013301&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.96&pickMembers%5B1%5D=3.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2015&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2019&referencePeriods=20150101%2C20190101>; The Consumer Price Index increased by 0.6 percent between September 2019 and September 2020: Statistics Canada, *Table 18-10-0004-11 Consumer Price Index, by geography, monthly, percentage change, not seasonally adjusted, provinces, Whitehorse and Yellowknife*, accessed October 27, 2020, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=1810000411>.

socioeconomic backgrounds. Prior to COVID-19, students relied on part-time jobs or jobs unrelated to their field of study to afford these rising costs, further adding to their work-load and potentially disrupting or negatively impacting their studies. In the current context, jobs across vocational fields are more precarious than ever,<sup>16</sup> leaving many students forced to choose between taking high-risk jobs, such as those in retail, grocery, or fast food,<sup>17</sup> or risk using up their savings. As illustrated above, the announcement of support through CESB decreased student's financial concerns by 10 to 14 percent.<sup>18</sup> Access to financial support benefits like CESB is one way to address the stress related to affording post-secondary education and costs of living during this time. To fill the gap in this support left by the ending of CESB, the provincial government should develop a Students Benefits Package, aimed at providing students in financial need with support to pay for related education costs, such as safe housing, healthy food and transportation. This package should consist of \$400/weekly, or \$1600 over a 4-week period, similar to CERB and CESB, and would exist as a way for students to supplement their income.

## QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF ONLINE LEARNING

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**Principle:** Students should have equitable access to a high-quality education, even in the new long-term reality of living during and after a global pandemic.

**Principle:** Students with disabilities should not be disadvantaged in online learning.

**Principle:** Students should not disproportionately bear pandemic-driven educational costs.

**Principle:** Students should not have their personal privacy or security compromised as a result of online learning.

**Principle:** Students should not be subject to further stress during academic assessments as a result of COVID-19.

**Principle:** Students should have equitable access to the technology required to learn online successfully.

**Concern:** Given the rapid transition to remote delivery, institutions are unable to provide a high-quality online learning environment.

**Concern:** Online lectures and assignments may not be accessible to students and students are not able to easily access accommodation aids or time-zone specific accommodations.

**Concern:** Students with disabilities may not be aware of or qualify for funding through the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities for services and equipment they previously accessed on campus.

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<sup>16</sup> Between February 2020 and April 2020, Ontario lost over one million jobs related to the pandemic: Nick Boisvert, "Ontario has now lost more than 1 million jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic," *CBC News*, May 8, 2020, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-covid19-april-jobs-1.5562034#:~:text=Toronto,Ontario%20has%20now%20lost%20more%20than%201%20million%20jobs%20during,Canada's%20latest%20national%20labour%20survey;Unemployment%20of%20students,aged%2015-24%20rose%20from%2012.1%20percent%20to%2023.6%20percent%20and%20the%20employment%20rate%20decreased%20from%2051.5%20percent%20to%2045.7%20percent%20between%20September%202019%20and%20September%202020:Statistics%20Canada,Table%2014-10-0021-01%20Unemployment%20rate,%20participation%20rate,%20and%20employment%20rate%20by%20type%20of%20student%20during%20school%20months,monthly,unadjusted%20for%20seasonality,accessed%20October%2027,%202020,online:https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410002101&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.7&pickMembers%5B1%5D=4.1&pickMembers%5B2%5D=5.1&cubeTimeFrame.startMonth=09&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2019&cubeTimeFrame.endMonth=09&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2020&referencePeriods=20190901%2C20200901>

<sup>17</sup> See, "COVID-19 Guidance for High-Risk and Essential Workplaces," Government of Canada (news releases), April 16, 2020, online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/centre-occupational-health-safety/news/2020/04/covid-19-guidance-for-high-risk-and-essential-workplaces.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students".

**Concern:** Students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or in rural and northern settings, may not have access to reliable internet and other technology to support remote learning.

**Concern:** Proctoring and other surveillance or assessment tools used by universities present the potential for serious privacy and security concerns for students, including how data is collected and retained.

**Concern:** Students uncomfortable or unwilling to consent to the use of online assessment tools may not have alternative options available.

**Concern:** Proctoring, surveillance or assessment tools, and unnecessarily complicated requirements for assessment act as barriers to student success by causing increased stress and a decrease in performance.

**Concern:** Students may be charged additional fees associated with the costs of online course delivery.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should match institution funding towards supporting online learning and remote delivery.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should expand access to the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities, including waiving the requirement for students to have applied for the Ontario Student Assistance Program.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should create a strategy aimed at improving the promotion of the grant and streamlining the process to reduce the wait time for receiving funding.

**Recommendation:** The Ontario University Council on Quality Assurance should expand Institutional Quality Assurance Processes requirements to include program delivery criteria for online courses, and include an assessment of online learning in its Final Assessment Report.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide funding to institutions to hire staff and implement online learning features to optimize accessibility of online learning according to Universal Design for Learning principles.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should ensure that directives on online course delivery mandate that institutions are not allowed to download costs associated with online course delivery onto students through additional course fees.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or in rural and northern settings, are appropriately prioritized in the government's investment in broadband internet.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should expand existing regulations and implement guidelines to specifically address the privacy and security concerns of proctoring, other online assessment tools that require students to provide access to computer functions, and any institution-specific assessment processes, in order to ensure the consistency and quality of assessments and that any data collected is secure in terms of storage, access, retention and use.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should make funding available to institutions for training and staffing costs necessary to implement alternative forms of learning assessments that do not use proctoring and other online assessment tools.

In September 2020, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) released *Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education: Lessons from the Pandemic and Recommendations*, a report detailing pressing student concerns regarding the quality and accessibility of online learning.<sup>19</sup> The report

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<sup>19</sup> Jackie Pichette, Sarah Brumwell, and Jessica Rizk, *Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education: Lessons from the Pandemic and Recommendations* (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2020), online: <http://www.heqco.ca/en->

identifies that, on top of the stress of social isolation, students are struggling to receive academic support and understand course expectations. Further, given the rapid transition to remote delivery, students are facing online-specific challenges that have not been adequately addressed, such as access to online-specific accommodations (e.g., closed captioning), excessive screen time (i.e., “Zoom fatigue”), and access to stable internet connections and other technologies needed to support access to courses.

The quality and accessibility of education should not be compromised as a result of the need to transition to online delivery. Yet, many students feel that online learning does not provide the same value as in-person learning: 68 percent of respondents to a survey conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) in May 2020 did not feel that remote learning offered the same value as in-person learning.<sup>20</sup> Students are also concerned about ease of access to online classes and assignments.<sup>21</sup> Further, students, especially those with disabilities, are also unsure about course expectations and delivery.<sup>22</sup> As a result of these challenges, many students have considered deferring classes or switching to part-time academic schedules. Institutions may also face increased costs for online learning and assessment tools, which have been, and will continue to be, downloaded onto students. To support students to continue their education, the provincial government should match post-secondary institution funding to support high-quality online learning that prioritizes students and enables instructors to engage students in dynamic and innovative ways. This funding could go towards areas such as technology and platforms to assist online course delivery, training for instructors, and hiring of support staff to improve course delivery. Further, the provincial government should ensure that directives on online course delivery mandate that institutions are not allowed to download costs associated with online course delivery onto students through additional course fees.

The quality of university education in the province is currently assessed and monitored through the Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assessment’s (OUCQA) Quality Assurance Framework, under which universities in the province are required to implement Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAPs). Every eight years, OUCQA completes Quality Assurance Audits to ensure institutions are making progress towards, and adhering to, their IQAPs.<sup>23</sup> However, the current framework does not formally assess the quality of online courses. There is an opportunity for OUCQA to expand its current IQAPs requirement to include the delivery of online courses and mandate that the evaluation of online learning must be included in the final reports to support quality assessment and monitoring of online learning.<sup>24</sup>

Online learning has also increased accessibility challenges for students, especially for those with disabilities. According to HEQCO’s *Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education* report, students with disabilities are finding it harder to access accommodations and alternate format materials compared to students without disabilities: “53% of students with disabilities and 40% of those without disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they knew where to go for counselling or advising during the pandemic.”<sup>25</sup> Students with disabilities also reported experiencing issues with technology at a higher rate than students without: “16% of students with disabilities and less than 10% of those without disabilities, reported experiencing issues with technology and/or internet access once the winter 2020 semester moved online.”<sup>26</sup> Students with disabilities identified a number of challenges with online learning; for example, students who are hard of hearing may have difficulty tracking live lectures.<sup>27</sup> The CASA survey also identified accessibility concerns with online learning, finding that 59 percent of respondents disagreed that remote courses offered the same support as in-person classes, and 43 percent

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ca/Research/ResPub/Pages/Improving-the-Accessibility-of-Remote-Higher-Education-Lessons-from-the-pandemic-and-recommendations.aspx.

<sup>20</sup> *Students Are Still Worried* (CASA).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Pichette, Brumwell, and Rizk, *Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education*.

<sup>23</sup> Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, *Quality Assurance Framework* (Toronto, ON: Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2017), 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Read more about OUSA’s stance on the quality and credibility of online learning in Aaryan Chaudhury, Shawn Cruz, Julia Göllner, Peter Henan, and Shannon Kelly, *Policy Paper: Technology Enabled Learning* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2018), 16-17.

<sup>25</sup> Pichette, Brumwell, and Rizk, *Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

of respondents disagreed that it was just as easy to access assessments.<sup>28</sup> There are also concerns around the difficulty of participating in virtual learning for students in substantially different time zones from their post-secondary institution. For example, students in different time zones may not have the same ability to attend synchronous classes or complete assessments with limited completion windows. To address accessibility concerns with online learning, the provincial government should support institutions to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure online learning is accessible and inclusive. This should include providing funding to post-secondary institutions for hiring staff and implementing features that would support UDL integration.<sup>29</sup>

Recognizing that students with disabilities experience additional barriers to online learning, it is important that the supports available are both accessible and meet student needs. Currently, students with permanent disabilities are eligible for the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Persons with Disabilities (CSG-PDSE). The CSG-PDSE can provide financial assistance for services and equipment that some students with disabilities may require to study remotely. However, students may be unaware of this resource, and those who are aware may face barriers to access as only students who qualify for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) are eligible for the CSG-PDSE. To ensure all students who require this support are able to access it, the provincial government should create a strategy aimed at improving the promotion of the grant and streamlining the process to reduce the wait time for receiving funding. Further, the provincial government should work with the federal government to waive the OSAP requirement that limits the accessibility of the CSG-PDSE.<sup>30</sup>

Students should have access to high-quality education, no matter where they are in the province. In order to access online learning, students require a stable internet connection and other technologies. However, not all students have access to stable internet and needed technologies. The CASA survey found that 55 percent of students are concerned about having access to a reliable, high-speed internet connection, and 47 percent were concerned about having access to other necessary technology.<sup>31</sup> Access to stable, high-speed internet connection continues to be an issue of inequitable access, particularly for students living in rural and northern communities, including those on First Nations reserves. As identified in the CASA report, “speed requirements [for online classes] get as high as 10 and 15.9 Mbps, [yet] only 64% of rural residents have access compared to 100% of urban residents.”<sup>32</sup> This is a significant barrier to the ability of students from a rural and/or northern setting to access classes and complete assessments. Recognizing that equitable access to high-speed internet connection is crucial for online learning and remote delivery, the provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure that funding for broadband internet prioritizes students, especially students from low socioeconomic backgrounds or in rural and northern settings.<sup>33</sup>

Students are also concerned about the use of proctoring and other online surveillance tools currently used to monitor students during assessments.<sup>34</sup> Proctoring tools can collect visual and auditory information about students’ appearance and surroundings and actively access the computers of students (e.g., controlling the webcam or locking down non-assessment functions). Students have been vocal about their

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<sup>28</sup> *Students Are Still Worried*.

<sup>29</sup> Read more about OUSA’s stance on the importance of UDL and accessibility of post-secondary education in Shawn Cruz, Shemar Hackett, Skye Nip, and Brittany Williams, *Policy Paper: Student Accessibility & Disability Inclusion* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Read more about OUSA’s stance on access to financial supports like the CSG-PDSE in Cruz, Hackett, Nip, & Williams, *Student Accessibility & Disability Inclusion*.

<sup>31</sup> *Students Are Still Worried*.

<sup>32</sup> *Students Are Still Worried*.

<sup>33</sup> Read more about OUSA’s stance on ensuring student in rural and northern communities have equitable access to internet in Malek Abou-Rabia, David Bath, Katlyn Kotila, and Serina Seguin, *Policy Paper: Rural & Northern Students* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Giacomo Panico, “U of O students wary of ‘extreme’ anti-cheating software,” *CBC News*, July 2, 2020, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/exam-surveillance-software-university-ottawa-1.5633134>; Giacomo Panico, “University cheating might be up — but don’t just blame students,” *CBC News*, June 19, 2020, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/university-cheating-might-be-up-but-don-t-just-blame-students-1.5618272>; Colleen Flaherty, “Big Proctor,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 11, 2020, online: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/11/online-proctoring-surg-ing-during-covid-19>; Emily Waitson, “Laurier Math Department Faces Backlash Over Mandatory External Webcams Needed For Spring Exams,” *The Cord*, May 8, 2020, online: <https://thecord.ca/laurier-math-department-faces-backlash-over-mandatory-external-webcams-needed-for-spring-exams/>.

concerns with the use of these proctoring tools. For example, more than 10,000 students at Western University recently signed a petition calling on the university to stop using Proctortrack,<sup>35</sup> a proctoring system used to monitor exams, after the system suffered a major security breach.<sup>36</sup> There is also a petition at McMaster University calling for the discontinuation of proctoring tools, citing privacy concerns.<sup>37</sup> The use of these tools pose privacy concerns and cause unnecessary anxiety and discomfort for students, who may be uncomfortable being monitored and now have to abide by and worry about extensive restrictions and rules during proctored exams.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, proctoring tools may be incompatible with assistive technologies. As classes continue online, institutions must implement new ways of delivering assessments that do not compromise the privacy and security of students. As a first step, the government should expand regulations to specifically address the use of surveillance and proctoring tools to ensure that the privacy of students is protected, and create a privacy and security standard that proctoring tools must meet to be allowed for use by institutions. Additionally, the provincial government should make funding available to institutions for training and staffing costs necessary to implement alternative forms of learning assessments that do not use proctoring and other online assessment tools.

## COORDINATED INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

**Principle:** The government should mitigate immediate and long-term negative effects of COVID-19 on post-secondary education.

**Principle:** Students are a key group which should be prioritized through institutional and government support in recovery efforts.

**Concern:** The provincial government is not appropriately prioritizing students in coordinating COVID-19 recovery plans.

**Concern:** The effects of COVID-19 on students and their post-secondary institutions will be long-lasting and unpredictable.

**Concern:** The provincial government is not providing consistent direction for post-secondary institutions in areas where it could be beneficial, leaving open the possibility for overly aggressive opening timelines and poor-quality remote delivery of courses.

**Concern:** The provincial government has decreased its contributions to university operating budgets by seven percentage points over the last four years.<sup>39</sup>

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide application-based grant funding to institutions to support increased, evidence-based technological needs resulting from remote delivery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>35</sup> “Stop the use of Proctortrack at Western University,” *Change.org*, accessed November 10, 2020, online:

[https://www.change.org/p/alan-shephard-stop-the-use-of-proctortrack-at-western-university?recruiter=1064553930&recruited\\_by\\_id=192b6090-6f88-11ea-9459-9b43a78cbdd1&utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_medium=copylink&utm\\_campaign=petition\\_dashboard](https://www.change.org/p/alan-shephard-stop-the-use-of-proctortrack-at-western-university?recruiter=1064553930&recruited_by_id=192b6090-6f88-11ea-9459-9b43a78cbdd1&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=petition_dashboard).

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Lupton, “Western students alerted about security breach at exam monitor Proctortrack,” *CBC News*, October 15, 2020, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/western-students-alerted-about-security-breach-at-exam-monitor-proctortrack-1.5764354>.

<sup>37</sup> “Respect students’ privacy and stop the use of intrusive proctoring software,” *Change.org*, accessed November 10, 2020, online: [https://www.change.org/p/mcmaster-university-respect-students-privacy-and-stop-the-use-of-intrusive-proctoring-software?use\\_react=false](https://www.change.org/p/mcmaster-university-respect-students-privacy-and-stop-the-use-of-intrusive-proctoring-software?use_react=false).

<sup>38</sup> Jessica Wong, “Post-secondary students call for changes to online exam rules as cheating concerns rise,” *CBC News*, October 25, 2020, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/post-secondary-assessment-integrity-proctoring-1.5767953>.

<sup>39</sup> Council of Ontario Finance Officers, *Financial Report of Ontario Universities: 2018-19 Highlights* (Council of Ontario Universities, April 2020), online: <https://cou.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COFO-Highlights-Report-2018-19.pdf>; “Financial Information of Universities and Colleges (FIUC),” *CAUBO Knowledge Centre*, accessed October 13, 2020, online: <https://www.caubo.ca/knowledge-centre/surveysreports/fiuc-reports/#squelch-taas-accordion-shortcode-content-4>.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide directives to consistently coordinate under which conditions universities may re-open and to create a safe and high-quality learning environment based on evidence-based pedagogical practices and public health directives.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide envelope funding to institutions to support pandemic-associated costs based on need, as determined by an appropriate metric such as being proportional to total university enrollment.

The independence of Ontario's post-secondary education system is a key value driver, creating competition for service delivery and students. In times of crisis, this independence remains important. However, OUSA acknowledges that some universities are better poised to weather the effects of COVID-19, a disaster far beyond the reasonable range of planning that should be required of universities. There are also financial considerations. Universities were already operating at high-efficiency, and with increased dependency on student tuition,<sup>40</sup> a crisis like COVID-19, which has led to decreased student financial capacity to attend post-secondary,<sup>41</sup> endangers the financial capacity of post-secondary institutions.<sup>42</sup> To preserve universities throughout this crisis, and avoid COVID-19 system failure which would ultimately reduce access after the crisis is over, key strategic action accompanied by targeted investments by the province to coordinate the response of the system is desirable and needed.

First, investment to overcome technological barriers remains necessary to ensure all institutions can continue to provide quality educational experiences for students already enrolled. Investment in Information Technology and Learning Management systems, particularly targeting institutions with fewer resources or those with less advanced technologies will unlock better learning outcomes for students and increase efficiency by reducing the number of students choosing to defer their education due to perceived or actual inferiority of the current digital learning climate. Therefore, the provincial government should provide application-based grant funding to institutions to support increased, evidence-based technological needs resulting from remote delivery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, providing directives for coordinating term-of-reopening across the province that accounts for any serious regional disparities and is based in evidence-informed pedagogical practices and public health directives, will relieve pressure on universities to achieve economic advantage by opening before they are completely ready, and ultimately will prevent unnecessary university-related COVID outbreaks. Some of the effects of re-opening too early can be seen in examples from the United States where in-person classes were cancelled shortly after they began, leaving some students significantly out-of-pocket for living expenses, causing pedagogical change, and resulting in general disruption and dissatisfaction.<sup>43</sup> Government-led guidance that prioritizes public health and safety would prevent many of these effects. These directives should be accompanied by envelope funding to institutions to support pandemic-associated costs to ensure a safe return to campus. This funding should be based on need, as determined

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<sup>40</sup> OUSA advocates for long-term changes to cost-sharing wherein the provincial government increases operating grants until students are contributing no more than one-third of universities' total operating budgets. Temporary bonuses to operating grants will be essential to give universities financial maneuverability and stability, and ensure their survival, even if the Ontario government does not choose to pursue this policy in the long-term. The one-third target is set with the understanding that international tuition revenue may see significant drops, and if some institutions receive more than is immediately needed, these institutions should not be penalized for having a greater proportion of domestic students. Further, there are many initiatives that would benefit greatly from financial support and surplus funding through operating grant bonuses can be put towards ensuring these initiatives are operating to their full potential. To read more on OUSA's stance on fair cost-sharing, see Stephanie Bertolo, Danny Chang, Catherine Dunne, Matthew Gerrits, and Urszula Sitarz, *Policy Paper: Tuition* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> "CIBC survey: Twice as many students as adults experience income disruption from COVID-19," CISION, July 6, 2020, online: <https://www.newswire.ca/fr/news-releases/sondage-de-la-banque-cibc-les-etudiants-sont-deux-fois-plus-nombreux-que-les-adultes-a-subir-des-perturbations-liees-au-revenu-en-raison-de-la-covid-19-892438504.html?utm>.

<sup>42</sup> Projections from Statistics Canada suggest that "overall, [Canadian universities] could be facing potential losses ranging from \$377 million (-0.8%) to \$3.4 billion (-7.5%) during the 2020/2021 academic year depending on the scenario.": "Financial information of universities for the 2018/2019 school year and projected impact of COVID-19 for 2020/2021," *Statistics Canada - The Daily*, October 8, 2020, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/201008/dq201008b-eng.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Stankiewicz and Will Feuer, "Students are heading back to campus and so is the coronavirus as colleges scramble to cancel in-person classes," *CNBC*, August 20, 2020, online: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/19/students-are-heading-back-to-campus-and-so-is-the-coronavirus-as-colleges-scramble-to-cancel-in-person-classes.html>.

by an appropriate metric such as enrollment, and allocated for capital and operating costs to protect against the spread of COVID-19, including cleaning supplies, contact tracing resources, or additional staff.

## SECONDARY EDUCATION

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**Principle:** Secondary education should build the foundation for access to post-secondary education.

**Principle:** The COVID-19 pandemic should not affect secondary students' ability to pursue their post-secondary path of choice.

**Principle:** The provincial government should prioritize student safety and academic success in plans for secondary education.

**Concern:** Changes to secondary education systems may not adequately prioritize students' ability to pursue post-secondary education, instead focusing their limited energy on adapting learning experiences to an online medium.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to support supplemental academic programming for incoming students.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should, after consultation with the Council of Ontario Universities, provide temporary instructive directives to universities to establish standard approaches to admissions processes and determinations.

Access to post-secondary education should not be adversely affected by a temporary crisis such as COVID-19, which leads to disparities beyond student control. However, primary and secondary education have been significantly affected by COVID-19 public health measures. This has potential implications for post-secondary access as grade 12 fall-term instruction is critical for consideration by university admission departments. Regional disparities, access to technology, and socio-economic variables will all contribute to negative learning outcomes and corresponding grade disparity this fall. The result of these disparities could mean that students who might, under normal circumstances, have been able to meet the eligibility requirements for more competitive university programs, or performed more preferably, may be less competitive candidates.

Establishing best-practices to be exercised across the Ontario universities will promote fairness in admission procedures and decisions that will affect students' entire lives. The government should consult with the Council of Ontario Universities to develop instructive directives for standard approaches to admission processes and determinations. This would entail exploring uniform swings in minimum admission averages, compensatory considerations relating to students' technology access or socioeconomic variables affecting their activities during COVID-19, and consistent adjustments across the system.

A preferable way to compensate for learning shortfalls due to COVID-19 is to provide resources for remedial or supplementary programming, conducted by post-secondary institutions themselves to acclimatize students to the standards required for them to continue education. Such courses are already commonplace at many universities, sometimes billed as 0-hundred level courses or pre-university courses.<sup>44</sup> With summer months between high school and university, there exists opportunities for universities to plan and execute bridging programs and courses on a greater scale, so long as they are adequately supported through resources and direction given to them by the provincial government, either by establishing a grant for universities to provide these forms of programs for free, or providing a provincial bursary to students who need to access these programs.

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<sup>44</sup> "University Student Transition Resources," Ontario Universities' Application Centre, updated July 7, 2020, online: <https://www.ouac.on.ca/university-student-transition-resources/>.

## STUDENT HEALTH AND SAFETY

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**Principle:** Upon resumption of in-person classes, students should be able to pursue post-secondary education without concern for their health.

**Principle:** Students should receive accommodations while there exists health risks due to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure equitable access to learning and work-integrated learning opportunities.

**Concern:** Certain populations, including immunocompromised people and those with chronic medical conditions, have a higher risk of COVID-19 and severe health outcomes.

**Concern:** Return-to-campus protocols may not adequately consider the accommodations and health precautions necessary for students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations to pursue a high-quality post-secondary education.

**Concern:** Students continuing to study remotely due to COVID-19 health risks may not have adequate access to learning and work-integrated learning opportunities.

**Recommendation:** When universities resume in-person classes, the provincial government should provide directives for universities to incorporate course delivery standards according to Universal Design principles to ensure that students studying remotely can still access the same quality of post-secondary education as their peers.

**Recommendation:** The Ontario Human Rights Commission should develop a policy on accommodating students in post-secondary education and experiential learning opportunities accounting for the increased health risks posed by COVID-19, specifically addressing the higher risk faced by students in or in close contact with COVID-19 vulnerable populations.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide additional funding and support for institutions and employers to create and accommodate for remote work-integrated learning opportunities to ensure equitable access for students, accounting for the increased health risks posed by COVID-19.

As universities plan for a return to campus or shift to a blended learning delivery model that includes in-person components, all students, particularly students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations, should continue to be able to access a high-quality education at their post-secondary institution of choice without concern for their health. Students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations, including those with an underlying medical condition or those taking immunosuppressing medications, are at a higher risk of contracting and being severely impacted by the COVID-19 virus,<sup>45</sup> and are therefore particularly impacted by return-to-campus plans. The educational experience of students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations (e.g., through co-habitation or regular contact as part of work) may also be disproportionately impacted due to the health risks of in-person work-integrated learning opportunities. This disadvantages students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations by limiting their access to these opportunities and prevents them from gaining valuable experience.<sup>46</sup>

The provincial government and institutions should take a proactive approach to protecting the health of these students when classes return to campus and ensuring their academic experiences are not negatively affected. The provincial government should make this a priority by directing universities to allow students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations who seek accommodations to study remotely and providing guidance on ensuring these students continue to be able to access a high-quality education

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<sup>45</sup> “Vulnerable populations and COVID-19,” *Government of Canada*, accessed October 14, 2020, online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/vulnerable-populations-covid-19.html>.

<sup>46</sup> To read more about the importance of experiential learning opportunities such as work-integrated learning, see Aaryan Chaudhury, Michael Del Bono, Julia Göllner, and Shannon Kelly, *Policy Paper: Student Entrepreneurship, Employment, & Employability* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2019).

experience, including access to academic accommodations and safe work-integrated learning opportunities.

Additionally, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) should produce a policy on accommodating students in COVID-19 high-risk populations in post-secondary education to ensure a high-quality, comprehensive, and safe academic experience and equitable access to experiential learning opportunities. In the policy, the OHRC should set out clear guidelines and parameters for the process of institutions offering accommodations, including whether and what documentation is required. Further, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should act to make sure there are work-integrated learning opportunities available to students in or in close contact with COVID-19 high-risk populations by providing investment and support to institutions and employers to create and accommodate for remote work-integrated learning opportunities, see more in “Employment Opportunities”, below.

## EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

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**Principle:** Experiential education should retain its prominence in Ontario’s post-secondary education system as the province responds to COVID-19.

**Concern:** Employment opportunities have been negatively affected by the necessary responses to COVID-19.

**Concern:** Lack of experiential learning opportunities due to COVID-19 may affect access to employment opportunities following graduation.

**Concern:** Experiential learning opportunities may be negatively affected by remote attendance.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should expand funding to the Summer Employment Opportunities Program, Youth Job Connection Program, Ontario Internship Program, and other Ontario Public Service programs that employ university students and recent graduates.

**Recommendation:** When transitioning from majority online to majority in person Ontario civil service jobs, the provincial government should prioritize its own online civil service student positions for students with immunocompromised status.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should solicit and fund experiential learning proposals from Ontario’s universities that are awaiting funding.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should convene a working group of provincial accrediting bodies to discuss a unified approach to work-integrated accreditation requirements.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should cooperate with other Canadian governments to convene a working group of national accrediting bodies to discuss a unified approach work-integrated accreditation requirements.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should commission research on how to effectively build experiential learning opportunities in a remote environment.

Response to COVID-19 necessitated shutdowns and adaptations of major sectors, including the post-secondary sector, to control viral spread. This affected not only the delivery of ordinary course material, but also had serious impacts on the experiential learning components of students’ education. While the sector has begun to adjust to online delivery of seminars and lectures, there are some forms of learning

that cannot be translated online, such as hands-on labs. This has particularly impacted experiential learning opportunities, as programs like co-operative learning programs have been severely affected.<sup>47</sup>

Addressing these shortcomings is essential for students to achieve co-operative designations and realize the benefits of experiential learning. Experiential learning opportunities also have positive spillover effects for society, from direct taxation, to community involvement, the lifetime of added value for the student and their employers, and the corresponding economic generation for society as a whole.<sup>48</sup> To read more about the student-identified benefits of experiential learning and OUSA's recommendations, see our policy paper on *Student Entrepreneurship, Employment, & Employability*.<sup>49</sup>

For society to continue reaping these benefits now and in the long-term, the provincial government should capitalize on this opportunity for strategic investment in pandemic-era experiential learning.

We encourage the provincial government to build on existing programs to efficiently deliver funding to improve job availability to Ontario students. Specifically, the provincial government should expand the Summer Employment Opportunities and Youth Job Connection programs, the Ontario Internship Program, as well as other Ministry-specific youth employment programs or other programs that operate under the same principles. These programs, focused on bridging students to existing private-sector jobs or supporting in-house roles within the civil service, would require minimal added workload for the government to ensure accountability and compliance.

As our province transitions from predominately virtual and online spaces back to in-person work, it is also important to recognize that even within in the bounds of public health directives there will continue to be those who are unable to safely make this transition. This is particularly true for students with immunocompromised status. To support these students to have access to experiential learning opportunities that are safe, the provincial government should prioritize its own online and virtual civil service student positions for those with immunocompromised status when transitioning from majority online to in-person civil service work.

Universities may also have capacity to deliver new experiential learning programs in an online environment, but may lack the funding to hire requisite staff, or secure equipment or technology licenses in the current post-secondary fiscal environment. OUSA believes that funding made available for experiential learning projects that are suitable and ready for a rapid online rollout would be prudent to continue the Ontario government's commitment to experiential learning through the pandemic.

Finally, there is a need to better understand and direct institutions in the delivery of experiential learning opportunities. This is of particular importance when it comes to accreditation of experiential learning opportunities at the provincial and national level, and the development of experiential learning opportunities offered in a remote context. The provincial government has an opportunity to promote consistency and ensure coordinated direction for the development of work-integrated learning opportunities by convening a working group of provincial accrediting bodies, and cooperating with other Canadian governments to convene a working group of national accrediting bodies, to discuss a unified approach to work-integrated learning accreditation requirements. There is also a need to better understand how work-integrated learning translates into an online context, both in terms of quality and accessibility. This requires research on how to effectively build experiential learning opportunities in a remote environment.

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<sup>47</sup> Paula Duhatschek, "University of Waterloo co-op students struggle to find placements as pandemic dries up opportunities," *CBC News*, May 27, 2020, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/university-waterloo-co-op-student-placements-covid-19-1.5585083>.

<sup>48</sup> Nathalie Saltikoff, "The Positive Implications Of Internships On Early Career Outcomes," *National Association of Colleges and Employers*, May 1, 2017, online: <https://www.naceweb.org/job-market/internships/the-positive-implications-of-internships-on-early-career-outcomes/>.

<sup>49</sup> Chaudhury, Del Bono, Göllner, & Kelly, *Student Entrepreneurship, Employment, & Employability*.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

**Principle:** International students should not be disproportionately affected by the impacts of COVID-19 on post-secondary education.

**Principle:** International students are valuable members of our communities and key contributors to Ontario's economy.

**Principle:** International graduates should be treated with dignity as future high-skilled workers who can contribute to Ontario's diversity and economic recovery.

**Concern:** The high cost of international tuition acts as a barrier for international students to access post-secondary education in Ontario.

**Concern:** The current job market makes it difficult for international students to gain post-graduation work experience and achieve permanent residency.

**Concern:** Barriers specific to international student participation will negatively affect university operating budgets.

**Concern:** Some international students may be in Canada unable to travel home, work or continue their studies due to program changes.

**Recommendation:** To prevent universities using international student tuition to address COVID-19-related shortfalls, the provincial government should regulate international tuition at a maximum increase of 5 percent per year to avoid pandemic-driven tuition hikes, and provide limited compensatory grants to cover revenue shortfalls.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should increase operating funding directed to institutions to assist in making up shortfalls as a result of COVID-19 drops in enrollment so that international students are not unduly burdened with these costs.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should liaise with the federal Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to help willing students achieve permanent residency in Ontario after graduation to avoid barriers raised by COVID-19.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should implement an exception system to allow students to work while they cannot progress their studies as a result of COVID-19.

International students have continued to play a prominent role in Ontario's post-secondary education system, increasing from 6 percent of enrollments in 2007 to 14 percent in 2017,<sup>50</sup> which has likely further expanded to 17 percent as of 2019.<sup>51</sup> COVID-19 has disrupted these students' ability to participate in Ontario's post-secondary system. Living across time zones with disparate internet access, access to geographic re-entry, and economic resources, international students face a number of barriers to be able to continue their post-secondary education.

Post-secondary institutions also face additional budgetary pressures that have subsequently affected international students. Domestic tuition cuts, stagnant grants, and increasing labour costs have pushed universities to rely on enrollment based financial strategies, increasing overall enrollment and increasing international student enrollment. As international student tuition remains unregulated, these students have become attractive revenue sources for universities. This has a negative impact on access and wellbeing for international students who face high and unpredictable tuition. The financial impact of

<sup>50</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 37-10-0086-01 Postsecondary enrolments, by status of student in Canada, country of citizenship and gender," (Ontario, 2007/2008 to 2017/2018), doi: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710008601-eng>.

<sup>51</sup> Kareem El-Assal, "642,000 international students: Canada now ranks 3rd globally in foreign student attraction," *CIC News*, February 20, 2020, online: <https://www.cicnews.com/2020/02/642000-international-students-canada-now-ranks-3rd-globally-in-foreign-student-attraction-0213763.html#gs.hfl2cv>.

emergencies such as COVID-19 on universities leave international students vulnerable to sudden or large tuition increases. Universities that are dependent on tuition from international students to make up for budgetary pressures are also left vulnerable to events affecting international participation.<sup>52</sup> As such, specific policy interventions are required to stabilize international student wellbeing while also recognizing the financial context for universities.

OUSA presents a holistic approach to this issue, consistent with the principles in our policy paper on *International Students & International Education*. We propose the provincial government mandate a cap on international tuition increases for the 2020-2021 year. As such action would have a negative financial impact on institutions, it should be supported by temporary per-international student grants from the provincial government to post-secondary institutions. These grants should be equal to 3.5 percent of 2019-2020 tuition rates, equivalent to the average increase in tuition for four-year degrees under OUSA's 5 percent/3 percent cohort tuition recommendations.<sup>53</sup>

OUSA also recognizes that enrollment numbers for international students may decrease due to a variety of factors, including negative actions taken by institutions. Regardless of the catalyst, the financial risk to Ontario's post-secondary institutions is too large to ignore. The government should, on a case-by-case basis, identify institutions where international student enrollment has dropped significantly, and provide partial, yet significant, bridge funding to account for the funding shortfall and resulting diseconomies of scale. Funding amounts must account for the fact that international students typically subsidize operations and domestic instruction.

International students also face difficulty in obtaining permanent residency as a result of COVID-19, because the Canada Experience Class immigration program requires a certain period of employment within a given timeframe before graduates are extended permanent residency. While immigration lies within federal purview, we ask the provincial government to both communicate with the federal government, and to take other measures within their grasp to extend student study permit status in Canada, including, if necessary, coordinating universities to enrol international students in free zero-weight courses to continue their study status in Canada. More than 80,000 international students will graduate this year. Students will have a harder time gaining post-graduation work experience and therefore have a harder time attaining permanent residency if they want to because the job market is adversely affected by COVID-19. We ask the Minister of Colleges and Universities to liaise with the federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to identify obstacles to permanent residency for Ontario graduates, and develop solutions to overcome those obstacles.

There may also be circumstances where international students whose programs have been cancelled or put on hold are unable to return home and remain in Canada. These students may face barriers to accessing employment due to visa or permitting limitations. To support these students, the provincial government should implement an exception system to allow students to work while they cannot progress their studies as a result of COVID-19.

## STUDENTS WITH CAREGIVER RESPONSIBILITIES

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**Principle:** Care of dependents should be affordable, accessible, and allow students with dependents to choose the program or company that best meets their needs.

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<sup>52</sup> For example, see, Julia Knope, "What will happen to Saudi students enrolled in Canada?," *CBC News*, August 8, 2018, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/saudi-arabia-students-dispute-1.4776898>.

<sup>53</sup> These recommendations ask the provincial government to regulate international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of 5 percent per year to match institutionally set limitations, and regulate in-cohort increases to international tuition at a maximum of 3 percent per year. See more on OUSA's recommendations to support international students in Shawn Cruz, Emma Evans, Matthew Gerrits, Fayza Ibrahim, Brook Snider, and Megan Town, *Policy Paper: International Students & International Education* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2020).

**Principle:** Student caregivers should not be forced to pay for student housing that they cannot access because of changing/new caregiving responsibilities.

**Principle:** Caregivers should be supported for the care-related work they do, and have taken on as a result of COVID-19.

**Concern:** COVID-19 and related public safety measures have exacerbated the already high cost of caregiving.

**Concern:** COVID-19 and related public safety measures have further reduced the already limited spots within child care.

**Concern:** Student caregivers who are now unable to move due to COVID-19-related caregiving responsibilities could be forced to pay to break a lease or pay rent on a property they cannot access.

**Concern:** Access to provincial funding and support is complicated and time-consuming, and is not always realistic for student caregivers.

**Concern:** Caregivers are not adequately supported for the care-related work they do, and have taken on as a result of COVID-19.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop an emergency grant for students with caregiver responsibilities in order to subsidize the cost of care.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop a provincial care program, aimed at providing caregivers with comprehensive, accessible and affordable care for dependents.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should amend the *Residential Tenancies Act* to make it easier for caregivers who have had to move or are unable to return to their unit due to changing caregiving responsibilities to end a tenancy early.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop a centralized resource database and application website that allows students to apply to all eligible provincial funding at once.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop a benefits package for caregivers to support them for the caregiving work and responsibilities they take on.

Caregiver refers to any person who looks after others who are dependent on them, such as children, the elderly, those with disabilities or those who are sick, outside of the employment context over a short- or long-term period. For many people, including students, caregiving responsibilities have been altered as a result of COVID-19. For example, many rely on schools for a majority of the care provided to school-age dependents. The shift to online schooling has limited the ability to rely on this option, leaving many students with school-aged dependents to choose between juggling their own studies with caregiving and other responsibilities, leaving or pausing their studies to prioritize caregiving, or paying for private care that they had likely not budgeted for.<sup>54</sup> To account for the increased need for private care, the provincial government should develop an emergency grant for students to subsidize or cover this cost. Specifically, the “emergency” aspect of the grant refers to anything affected by COVID-19, such as changes in care, school systems, or caregiver responsibilities, such as needing to take on more shifts where the student is also employed as an essential worker.

Prior to COVID-19, finding spots in private care could be difficult: “An estimated 776,000 children (44% of all non-school-aged children) in Canada live in child care deserts, communities that are parched for

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<sup>54</sup> Norin Taj and Asmita Bhutani, “Where do students with children stand as Ontario universities and schools reveal reopening plans?,” *Academic Matters*, August 20, 2020, online: <https://academicmatters.ca/where-do-students-with-children-stand-as-ontario-universities-and-schools-reveal-reopening-plans/>.

available child care”, with Ontario ranking eight in terms of coverage.<sup>55</sup> Finding care is exceedingly difficult for “infants, children with disabilities, newcomers, rural communities, parents working nonstandard or part-time hours and, perhaps most of all, Indigenous families.”<sup>56</sup> Public safety measures in response to COVID-19 have reduced capacity at childcare centres across the province,<sup>57</sup> further limiting these spots. While reduced capacity is vital to keeping those in care safe and preventing the spread of COVID-19, it places an additional burden on caregivers who may have to pay additional fees or seek out care farther away, which is not always available or accessible. To support student caregivers as they navigate both their academic and caregiving responsibilities in an increasingly inaccessible care context, the provincial government should develop a provincial care program, aimed at providing caregivers with safe, affordable, and accessible options for care.

Further, while there are programs and grants already available to caregivers, the number of applications, resources, and access points creates barriers for caregivers to access these supports.<sup>58</sup> To eliminate barriers to access and improve the effectiveness of existing supports, the provincial government should develop a comprehensive website and application for COVID-related grants and programs that allows applicants to submit a single application to be considered for all eligible programs and grants.

Caregivers also require additional financial support during this time. Prior to COVID-19, caregivers' work often went unnoticed and unpaid, though they save the country between \$24 and \$31 billion per year.<sup>59</sup> This work has continued, if not increased, throughout the pandemic as many individuals and caregivers have taken on more caring responsibilities in order to assist their families, communities, and the province more broadly. For student caregivers, there is the added burden of the high cost of tuition<sup>60</sup> and limited financial aid<sup>61</sup> that makes it especially challenging when the work they do is unpaid. The provincial government should recognize the work caregivers do and added financial strain, and develop a benefits package that adequately supports caregivers to be able to safely and meaningfully care for dependents. This benefits package should be similar to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, available to all caregivers, at a rate of \$500/week, or \$2000 over a 4-week period.

For many student caregivers who have taken on new, or changing, responsibilities as a result of COVID-19, properties or units where they have signed leases may no longer be accessible or useable, such as where they are required to live in a different location in order to support their caregiving responsibilities. Caregivers should not face additional financial barriers for taking on responsibilities that are impacted by changing plans and abilities. As such, the provincial government should amend the *Residential Tenancies Act* to include a new section, modelled after sections 47.1 through 47.3, "Notice by Tenant Before End of Period or Term, Tenant or Child Deemed to Have Experienced Violence or Another Form of Abuse", to provide an avenue for caregivers to seek an early end to their tenancy due to changing caregiver responsibilities.

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<sup>55</sup> David Macdonald, *Child Care Deserts in Canada* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, June 28, 2018), online: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/child-care-deserts-canada>.

<sup>56</sup> Lynell Anderson, Morna Ballantyne, and Martha Friendly, *Child care for all of us: Universal child care for Canadians by 2020: Alternative Federal Budget, Technical Paper* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, December 2016), online: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/child-care-all-us>.

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Education, *Operational Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak: Child Care Re-Opening, Version 2* (Government of Ontario, July 2020), online: <http://edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/child-care-re-opening-operational-guidance.pdf>; Katie Dangerfield, “Coronavirus forces child-care centres to reduce capacity, leaving parents scrambling,” *Global News*, June 25, 2020, online: <https://globalnews.ca/news/7101390/coronavirus-child-care-reduced-capacity/>.

<sup>58</sup> Taj and Bhutani, n 20.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Goldman, “More support needed for unpaid caregivers in Canada,” *CBC Radio*, March 4, 2019, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/more-support-needed-for-unpaid-caregivers-in-canada-1.5041440>; Nicole F. Bernier, “Canada relying too heavily on unpaid caregivers — at a cost,” *Evidence Network*, October 2014, online: <https://evidencenetwork.ca/canada-relying-too-heavily-on-unpaid-caregivers-at-a-cost/>.

<sup>60</sup> Undergraduate tuition in Ontario can cost domestic students up to \$11,420 and international students up to \$55,110: “Tuition Fees by University,” *Universities Canada*, accessed September 29, 2020, online: <https://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/tuition-fees-by-university/>.

<sup>61</sup> In 2019, the province reduced its spending on student financial aid from \$2.04 billion to \$1.37 billion: Ryan Tishcoff, “What’s the Deal with the 2019 Changes to OSAP?,” *OUSA Blog*, September 17, 2019, online: [https://www.ousa.ca/blog\\_osap\\_changes](https://www.ousa.ca/blog_osap_changes).

## POLICY STATEMENT

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**Whereas:** High-quality education should be accessible to all willing and qualified students, regardless of socioeconomic status.

**Whereas:** Student financial aid should be responsive to changes in student financial need and means.

**Whereas:** Students should feel financially supported and able to access post-secondary education, without the concern of being unable to pay back future loans as a result of economic or income disruptions beyond their control.

**Whereas:** Post-secondary education funding, such as OSAP, should not be influenced by financial contributions from others, such as parents, guardians, etc., that can often be precarious or unreliable.

**Whereas:** All formats of learning, including online or remote learning, should be accessible to all students, regardless of income level or geographic location.

**Whereas:** Students should not be cut off from accessing OSAP now or in the future as a result of dropping courses due to COVID-19.

**Whereas:** Students should not be cut off from accessing OSAP now or in the future as a result of timing out of OSAP due to COVID-19.

**Whereas:** Students should be able to afford healthy lifestyles, including access to food, safe living conditions, and transport, while in school.

**Whereas:** Students should have equitable access to a high-quality education, even in the new long-term reality of living during and after a global pandemic.

**Whereas:** Students with disabilities should not be disadvantaged in online learning.

**Whereas:** Students should not disproportionately bear pandemic-driven educational costs.

**Whereas:** Students should not have their personal privacy or security compromised as a result of online learning.

**Whereas:** Students should not be subject to further stress during academic assessments as a result of COVID-19.

**Whereas:** Students should have equitable access to the technology required to learn online successfully.

**Whereas:** The government should mitigate immediate and long-term negative effects of COVID-19 on post-secondary education.

**Whereas:** Students are a key group which should be prioritized through institutional and government support in recovery efforts.

**Whereas:** Secondary education should build the foundation for access to post-secondary education.

**Whereas:** The COVID-19 pandemic should not affect secondary students' ability to pursue their post-secondary path of choice.

**Whereas:** The provincial government should prioritize student safety and academic success in plans for secondary education.

**Whereas:** Upon resumption of in-person classes, students should be able to pursue post-secondary education without concern for their health.

**Whereas:** Students should receive accommodations while there exists health risks due to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure equitable access to learning and work-integrated learning opportunities.

**Whereas:** Experiential education should retain its prominence in Ontario's post-secondary education system as the province responds to COVID-19.

**Whereas:** International students should not be disproportionately affected by the impacts of COVID-19 on post-secondary education.

**Whereas:** International students are valuable members of our communities and key contributors to Ontario's economy.

**Whereas:** International graduates should be treated with dignity as future high-skilled workers who can contribute to Ontario's diversity and economic recovery.

**Whereas:** Care of dependents should be affordable, accessible, and allow students with dependents to choose the program or company that best meets their needs.

**Whereas:** Student caregivers should not be forced to pay for student housing that they cannot access because of changing/new caregiving responsibilities.

**Whereas:** Caregivers should be supported for the care-related work they do, and have taken on as a result of COVID-19.

**Be it resolved that:** The provincial government should increase grants through OSAP for students who need additional financial assistance to start or continue post-secondary education.

**Be it further resolved that (BIFRT):** The provincial government should review its student financial aid for the 2020-2021 year to assess opportunities for temporary spending to students with greater net financial need.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should implement a moratorium on OSAP loan repayments and interest accrual, lasting a minimum of 2 years after graduation.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should lower the rate of interest on OSAP loans to match Canada's prime rates after a minimum 2 year moratorium.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should eliminate expected parental, spousal and individual contributions in the OSAP calculation to ensure students have the financial support to return to post-secondary education.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to students on a need basis who require additional support to access internet and technology necessary for online learning.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should suspend OSAP probation based on dropping courses for a minimum of 2 years, pending review of the pandemic and post-secondary education system.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should suspend OSAP time limitations for a minimum of 2 years, pending review of the pandemic and post-secondary education.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should develop a Student Benefits Package for students who demonstrate financial need throughout the school year.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should match institution funding towards supporting online learning and remote delivery.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should expand access to the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities, including waiving the requirement for students to have applied for the Ontario Student Assistance Program.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should create a strategy aimed at improving the promotion of the grant and streamlining the process to reduce the wait time for receiving funding.

**BIFRT:** The Ontario University Council on Quality Assurance should expand Institutional Quality Assurance Processes requirements to include program delivery criteria for online courses, and include an assessment of online learning in its Final Assessment Report.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide funding to institutions to hire staff and implement online learning features to optimize accessibility of online learning according to Universal Design for Learning principles.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should ensure that directives on online course delivery mandate that institutions are not allowed to download costs associated with online course delivery onto students through additional course fees.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should work with the federal government to ensure students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or in rural and northern settings, are appropriately prioritized in the government's investment in broadband internet.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should expand existing regulations and implement guidelines to specifically address the privacy and security concerns of proctoring, other online assessment tools that require students to provide access to computer functions, and any institution-specific assessment processes, in order to ensure the consistency and quality of assessments and that any data collected is secure in terms of storage, access, retention and use.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should make funding available to institutions for training and staffing costs necessary to implement alternative forms of learning assessments that do not use proctoring and other online assessment tools.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide application-based grant funding to institutions to support increased, evidence-based technological needs resulting from remote delivery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide directives to consistently coordinate under which conditions universities may re-open and to create a safe and high-quality learning environment based on evidence-based pedagogical practices and public health directives.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide envelope funding to institutions to support pandemic-associated costs based on need, as determined by an appropriate metric such as being proportional to total university enrollment.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to support supplemental academic programming for incoming students.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should, after consultation with the Council of Ontario Universities, provide temporary instructive directives to universities to establish standard approaches to admissions processes and determinations.

**BIFRT:** When universities resume in-person classes, the provincial government should provide directives for universities to incorporate course delivery standards according to Universal Design principles to ensure that students studying remotely can still access the same quality of post-secondary education as their peers.

**BIFRT:** The Ontario Human Rights Commission should develop a policy on accommodating students in post-secondary education and experiential learning opportunities accounting for the increased health risks posed by COVID-19, specifically addressing the higher risk faced by students in or in close contact with COVID-19 vulnerable populations.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide additional funding and support for institutions and employers to create and accommodate for remote work-integrated learning opportunities to ensure equitable access for students, accounting for the increased health risks posed by COVID-19.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should expand funding to the Summer Employment Opportunities Program, Youth Job Connection Program, Ontario Internship Program, and other Ontario Public Service programs that employ university students and recent graduates.

**BIFRT:** When transitioning from majority online to majority in-person Ontario civil service jobs, the provincial government should prioritize its own online civil service student positions for students with immunocompromised status.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should solicit and fund experiential learning proposals from Ontario's universities that are awaiting funding.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should convene a working group of provincial accrediting bodies to discuss a unified approach to work-integrated accreditation requirements.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should cooperate with other Canadian governments to convene a working group of national accrediting bodies to discuss a unified approach work-integrated accreditation requirements.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should commission research on how to effectively build experiential learning opportunities in a remote environment.

**BIFRT:** To prevent universities using international student tuition to address COVID-19-related shortfalls, the provincial government should regulate international tuition at a maximum increase of 5 percent per year to avoid pandemic-driven tuition hikes, and provide limited compensatory grants to cover revenue shortfalls.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should increase operating funding directed to institutions to assist in making up shortfalls as a result of COVID-19 drops in enrollment so that international students are not unduly burdened with these costs.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should liaise with the federal Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to help willing students achieve permanent residency in Ontario after graduation to avoid barriers raised by COVID-19.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should implement an exception system to allow students to work while they cannot progress their studies as a result of COVID-19.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should develop an emergency grant for students with caregiver responsibilities in order to subsidize the cost of care.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should develop a provincial care program, aimed at providing caregivers with comprehensive, accessible and affordable care for dependents.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should amend the *Residential Tenancies Act* to make it easier for caregivers who have had to move or are unable to return to their unit due to changing caregiving responsibilities to end a tenancy early.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should develop a centralized resource database and application website that allows students to apply to all eligible provincial funding at once.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should develop a benefits package for caregivers to support them for the caregiving work and responsibilities they take on.