

POLICY BRIEF: RESPONDING TO COVID-19

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.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please refer to OUSA's policy paper on Responding to COVID-19 published in November 2020.