

## POLICY BRIEF: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Students in Ontario are committed to promoting environmental sustainability on their campuses and in their daily lives. Unfortunately, post-secondary institutions often lack the incentives required to divest from fossil fuels and operate using sustainable energy sources. There is also a lack of biodiversity, organic food products, and effective waste management on campuses, as well as a growing need for eco-friendly transportation methods, sustainable learning materials, collaborative sustainability research, and climate change awareness campaigns.

### THE PROBLEM

#### ***Reliance on Unsustainable Energy Sources***

Post-secondary institutions have a social responsibility to divest from fossil fuels and carbon-heavy endowment portfolios. However, institutions continue to heavily invest in the fossil fuel industry and corporations that engage in a range of harmful environmental practices. In some cases, this is because institutions lack the incentives, expertise, or resources to transition to fossil fuel-free and carbon-neutral investment portfolios. Further, the lack of legislation defining the role of environmental concerns within Ontario's fiduciary duty framework creates an obstacle to institutions looking to make their investments more environmentally responsible. This allows investment managers to invest in unsustainable businesses and practices to support student endowment funds, which fails to represent the interests of students.

Post-secondary institutions may also not have strong enough incentives to operate their campuses in more sustainable ways. They may not allocate sufficient financial, policy, and planning resources to build the infrastructure necessary to build more sustainable campuses, and they are not required to adhere to a common standard for environmental sustainability when constructing campus buildings.

#### ***Lack of Biodiversity on Campuses***

Post-secondary institutions should cultivate accessible, biodiverse green spaces that do not conflict with local ecosystems. Instead, institutions often engage in overdevelopment or monoculture cultivation techniques, which means that students often do not have access to optimal naturalized, green, or biodiverse ecosystems on campus. Further, post-secondary students should have access to local, healthy, and affordable food items on campus, as well as resources that allow them to

incorporate healthy and environmentally conscious habits into their daily lives. Unfortunately, institutions may not have the space or the financial resources to grow their own food through community gardens or greenhouses, or to purchase food from local food providers. This also limits educational opportunities, which can lead to students being unaware of the environmental and economic impacts of post-secondary institutions purchasing food from outside of the province and country.

#### ***Inaccessible Eco-Friendly Transportation***

University campuses often lack the infrastructure required to offer sustainable transportation methods, such as sidewalks, pathways, bike routes, and bike storage. Institutions may also lack the framework and funding to establish or expand upon sustainable inter-campus transit shuttles for students, forcing them to rely on less sustainable methods. Further, for most students traveling to and from campus, electric vehicles, charging stations, and other clean modes of transportation are not a viable option due to price and lack of accessibility. Students who struggle to access municipal transportation will often use less eco-friendly transportation instead, and the lack of virtual or nearby opportunities for employment, education, and experiential learning often leads to excess vehicular travel.

#### ***Ineffective Waste Management***

On many post-secondary campuses, there is an excess of paper, plastic, and other waste (including water waste). Waste management audits are not readily accessible and clear for potential readers, including concerned citizens. Further, many institutions are not on track to meet and follow the provincial government's zero waste targets, while others do not have frameworks in place to ensure that recyclable and non-recyclable waste is processed responsibly. This points to a lack of accountability and

transparency regarding waste management practices at post-secondary institutions. Institutions also produce a significant amount of unspoiled food waste, most of which is not used for composting or donated to those in need. The improper management of compostable foods on post-secondary campuses often leads to excess emissions, and students may not have access to compost bins.

### ***Unsustainable Resource Procurement***

Increasing access to e-books, online educational resources, and digital learning platforms can reduce paper waste on campus, and excessive use of paper for educational purposes increases the amount of waste on campus. Unfortunately, many post-secondary institutions are heavily reliant on paper resources for learning and testing purposes.

Post-secondary institutions often purchase food and beverage products that use excessive food packaging, including single-use plastics, and which are not locally sourced. This results in a higher carbon footprint due to the extensive travel required to transport these products to campus. The local, organic products that students do have access to are often significantly more expensive than non-local, non-organic alternatives.

Finally, institutions often fail to properly dispose of electronic equipment, including computers, batteries, printer cartridges, and similar items, which can result in toxic chemicals leaking into landfills. Students often do not have access to proper disposal bins and systems to ensure their used electronic equipment is processed properly without harm to the environment. Institutions are also not required to purchase sustainably made furniture, which increases their carbon footprint.

### ***Inconsistent Institutional Sustainability Policies***

Often, post-secondary institutions do not prioritize the creation or implementation of campus-wide environmental sustainability policies, and many institutions do not publish reports on their sustainability efforts and initiatives. Where institutions have set emission reduction deadlines, they are often not well-equipped to meet those deadlines. Further, in most cases, institutions do not consult with and follow Indigenous practices when developing environmental sustainability initiatives.

### ***Limited Research Initiatives and Educational Campaigns***

Environmental sustainability is a multi-faceted concern affecting everyone and should involve the engagement of as many educational disciplines as possible. Importantly, there should be as much Indigenous engagement and representation as possible, and as desired, by Indigenous communities and nations in all environmental science and sustainability research. However, there is currently

a lack of opportunities for Indigenous contribution and perspectives in research on environmental science and sustainability. More broadly, there is the potential for more research than currently exists on economic, social, and other non-scientific aspects of environmental issues. And while environmental sustainability research currently engages the public to some extent, this research would be more effective if it engaged the public further.

All post-secondary students should learn about environmental sustainability and climate change. Waste management practices between municipalities differ, and students who have moved to a new location for education are likely unfamiliar with the practices of the municipality they have moved to. Educational resources on environmental sustainability, climate change, and the importance of living sustainably are lacking, and as a result, students are not well informed on the climate crisis and how they can create positive change in their own lives and their communities.

### ***Absence of Broad Action on Climate Change***

Climate change is an urgent crisis which requires immediate and extensive action. The provincial government is not adequately prioritizing action to fight climate change, and government initiatives may not adequately prioritize Indigenous knowledge, understanding, and worldviews with regard to climate change.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ***Promote Sustainable Energy Sources***

Using Strategic Mandate Agreements, the provincial government should incentivize post-secondary institutions to:

- Begin the process of divestment immediately and fully divest by no later than 2026;
- Produce publicly available, annual reports on the status of their divestment initiatives;
- Only partner with managers that have sustainable fund alternatives or do not have fossil fuel investments;
- Switch to clean energy sources;
- Meet LEED certification standards when constructing campus buildings;
- Retrofit all existing campus buildings to meet LEED certification standards by 2030; and
- Establish Green Revolving Funds for the purpose of developing sustainable campus energy sources, implementing carbon-capturing mechanisms, and retrofitting buildings.

Further, the provincial government should:

- Pass legislation in the style of the South African Trust Investments Act to redefine fiduciary responsibility to enable post-secondary institutions to choose to make investment decisions based on environmental impact;
- Create regular opportunities—namely, annual surveys, focus groups, and other feedback campaigns—for students to provide feedback on and identify concerns with their post-secondary institutions' funds management and sustainability practices;
- Implement a regulation under the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act to ensure oversight on environmental sustainability at post-secondary institutions;
- Update the Greenhouse Gas Campus Retrofit program to ensure that post-secondary institutions can receive funding to meet LEED standards;
- Subsidize post-secondary institutions' procurement of LED, sensor-operated lights, and other sustainable technologies, as well as mandate that institutions conduct and publicly release the results of annual internal and operational energy and emissions audits; and
- Mandate that all post-secondary institutions implement net-zero-carbon emission standards by 2026.

### ***Increase Campus Biodiversity***

The provincial government should:

- Create a green space fund that post-secondary institutions can use to protect existing biodiversity and support new forms of biodiversity on their campuses;
- Create a working group of post-secondary institutions and relevant stakeholders to develop a framework to assist institutions with implementing green spaces;
- Provide post-secondary institutions with funding to create their own community gardens and greenhouses, and/or to partner with local farmers; and
- Facilitate work-integrated learning opportunities between post-secondary institutions, interested students, and local agricultural operations.

### ***Increase Access to Eco-Friendly Transportation***

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing should:

- Work with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to create and audit policies regarding accessible pedestrian infrastructure, including the creation and maintenance of sidewalks, pathways, bike racks, and pedestrian drop-offs; and
- Provide ad hoc financial and informational support

to municipalities in which universities are located in order to establish alternative active transit programs.

Using Strategic Mandate Agreements, the provincial government should incentivize post-secondary institutions to:

- Make accessibility-oriented improvements to their pedestrian infrastructure aimed at connecting campus buildings to students and transportation hubs;
- Implement campus-specific initiatives to reduce visitors' desire or need to operate cars on campus;
- Implement campus-specific initiatives to improve the safety and viability of biking on campus, including more secure bike storage and safer roads;
- Facilitate virtual or nearby employment, education, and experiential learning opportunities; and
- Encourage post-secondary institutions to cluster their academic, research, administrative, residential, and recreational operations within walking distance, where possible, to reduce the need for on-campus vehicular traffic.

Further, the provincial government should:

- Provide post-secondary institutions with the framework and funding to establish, improve, and/or expand inter-campus shuttle systems and other clean transportation infrastructure on campus; and
- Provide municipalities with funding to expand and increase the frequency of public transit routes, and to make advancements in green transportation, such as electric busses and rapid transit.

### ***Improve Waste Management Practices***

The provincial government should:

- Work with municipalities to ensure that effective waste systems are in place to sort and manage compost, recycling, and litter;
- Using Strategic Mandate Agreements, incentivize post-secondary institutions to: (1) meet a 50% waste diversion rate by 2030; and (2) invest in effective waste reduction programs;
- Implement a minimum environmental framework for post-secondary institutions to ensure that they are on track to achieve the government's long-term goal of a waste-free Ontario;
- Mandate that post-secondary institutions publish comprehensive waste management reports on an annual basis; and
- Allocate funding to incentivize institutions to implement low-flow facilities and modernize their water infrastructure.

### ***Promote Sustainable Resource Procurement***

The provincial government should:

- Incentivize online educational resources in post-secondary institutions to eliminate paper resources for learning, except as required for students' accessibility needs;
- Incentivize institutions to offer locally sourced, organic food products that are cautious of single-use plastics to students for a price not more than 25% higher than the price of non-local, non-organic food products on campus;
- Provide institutions with funding to cover at least some of the cost of purchasing sustainable furniture and other learning materials; and
- Partner with existing electronic waste reduction programs and organizations to allow institutions to repurpose electronic materials on campus by donating them to departments using them for class studies or projects.

### ***Regulate Institutional Sustainability Policies***

The provincial government should:

- Create regulations under the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act to mandate that each university produce an environmental sustainability strategy or policy by 2023;
- Establish short- and long-term emissions standards for post-secondary institutions to follow and include in their sustainability policies;
- Mandate that institutions publish annual environmental sustainability reports indicating targets, accomplishments, and short-comings;
- Create an Indigenous lands and environment working group, open on a voluntary basis to all interested Indigenous communities and nations, that post-secondary institutions can consult when creating environmental sustainability policies; and
- Incentivize post-secondary institutions, through Strategic Mandate Agreements, to meet the emissions and waste management goals included in their sustainability policies.

### ***Expand Research Initiatives and Educational Campaigns***

The provincial government should:

- Expand the "Priority Topics" for the Ontario Research Grants to ensure that there are environmental sustainability research opportunities for each discipline of study;
- Create grants for Indigenous scholars in environmental studies and advertise opportunities for Indigenous researchers to apply for grants related to environment and energy;
- Mandate that researchers provide Indigenous communities and nations with an opportunity to

consult and provide feedback prior to and/or during research on relevant environmental science and sustainability matters; and

- Create research grants that favour integrative research and community engagement.

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance should:

- Create standards requiring post-secondary institutions to implement campus-specific learning modules for municipal waste management systems, climate science, and environmental sustainability that will equip students and post-secondary institutions with the tools they need to live and act more sustainably.

### ***Take Broad Action on Climate Change***

The provincial government should:

- Work with external groups to develop comprehensive and immediate measures to address the climate crisis;
- Prioritize transitioning the province to sustainable energy sourcing and use; and
- Support Indigenous-led climate action initiatives.