



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of approximately 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

## POLICY BRIEF: TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

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As technology advances and as the skills graduates needs to succeed in the workplace changes, post-secondary education needs to continue adapt. Students are interested in addressing the gaps in university teaching and learning, exploring more high impact learning opportunities, and highlighting the need for better inclusive learning experiences on campus. OUSA's hope is that students, staff, and faculty-alike will benefit from these recommendations to improve teaching and assessment in Ontario's universities.

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Gaps in teaching and learning**

Students are concerned that not all faculty and graduate TAs are formally trained in teaching, that some faculty may not follow best practices, that there are no incentives for faculty to achieve pedagogical excellence, and that the current PSE structures favour traditional learning environments that do not provide effective opportunities for deep learning for students. Additionally, contract staff often work in precarious conditions and opportunities for professional development in teaching are not well incentivized or promoted to faculty.

Although undergraduate TAs provide positive experiential learning experiences for students, current practices used for supervising undergraduate TAs are not effective, lack of regulation, and undergraduate TAs are not offered the same supports or protections as graduate TAs. Students acknowledge that biases, prejudices, and stereotypes can negatively impact teaching evaluations, but are concerned that outside of student evaluations of teaching, student feedback mechanisms are limited. Students are also concerned that there is limited research surrounding the effectiveness of contract staff resulting in preconceived notions of contract staff and limited research surrounding labor disputes, which impacts quality student experience.

#### **Limited high impact learning opportunities**

Students are concerned that programs, such as arts, social sciences, and humanities, provide comparatively fewer opportunities for recognized experiential learning than others, especially when discussing undergraduate research opportunities. Undergraduate research opportunities are often poorly advertised, decentralized, and inconsistent across degree programs. There is also concern that significant costs associated with participating in experiential learning is an added barrier to access and disproportionately affects marginalized students. Students have identified that they struggle

to articulate the skills they learned after completing experiential learning opportunities, often referred to as a "skills awareness gap". Given that the implementation of co-curricular recognition systems can be costly and require large administrative power, few post-secondary institutions have implemented a recognition system. Students are also concerned that mandatory placement opportunities for professional students across all areas of study are increasingly competitive and limited and travel costs to distant placements is a financial barrier to finding adequate placement opportunities.

#### **Inadequate inclusive learning experiences**

There is a heavy reliance on a narrow group of assessment types that do not encourage deep learning and there is a lack of variety in assessment opportunities for students in discipline-specific programs to develop skills in literacy and numeracy. Students note that final examinations can be a large cause of stress, which can cause students to underperform on final examinations. Students identify that learning is negatively impacted when they experience feelings of isolation and exclusion in the classroom. Furthermore, instructors lack accurate information on how to effectively support marginalized students, especially given that instructors in PSE are not required to complete inclusivity trainings, such as gender sensitivity training, cultural sensitivity training, accessibility training, decolonial training, or sexual violence education and training.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Improving teaching and learning

Students recommend that the provincial government support ongoing learning opportunities for faculty through envelope funding for university Teaching Centres. They also recommend that HEQCO establish metrics for quantifying engagement levels to assess teaching excellence and recommend that Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) be adapted to reward increased engagement through deep learning and experiential learning. Additionally, students recommend that the provincial government allocate funding to institutions to provide undergraduate TA opportunities and to ensure that training and protections are given to these undergraduate TAs.

Furthermore, students recommend that HEQCO continue to develop standards for assessing the quality of evaluations of teaching, promote best practices in the design and implementation of evaluation tools for faculty to receive ongoing feedback, and develop metrics to account for biases against instructors in evaluations. Students encourage the provincial government to work with institutions to develop a framework that combines peer review and student evaluation of teaching and recommend that the provincial government establish best practices and set metrics for the evaluation of teaching to be negotiated into future SMAs. The provincial government should mandate that student and peer evaluations of teaching be taken into consideration in the assessment and renewal of instructors after HEQCO has developed metrics to account for biases and prejudices against instructors in evaluations. HEQCO should conduct research on contract academic staff in comparison to general faculty trends in Ontario to examine impacts of current trends on students, instructors, and universities. OUSA also recommends that the provincial government work with institutions to create a sector-wide strategy on faculty hiring and renewal and create a Select Committee to establish best practices for faculty protections that prevent labour disputes and the adverse effects they present to students.

### Expanding high impact learning opportunities

Students want to see HEQCO expand its definition of experiential learning, provide institutions with a framework to assess and credit experiential opportunities, and develop a toolkit that provides faculty with resources on how to incorporate experiential learning opportunities into their courses. Students also recommend that COU set best practices for universities and faculty to effectively develop, implement, and promote experiential learning experiences to students. OUSA recommends that the provincial government work with community-based partners to incentivize experiential learning opportunities and ensure that every student has at least one experiential learning opportunity by the time they graduate from PSE. The provincial government should also implement a needs-based bursary to allow students

with financial accessibility concerns to have access to experiential learning opportunities and commit to investing in a diverse range of high-quality experiential learning opportunities through envelope funding across all areas of study.

To address students struggling to articulate the skills they have acquired through their experiential learning opportunities, students recommend that HEQCO conduct more research on how institutions can incorporate learning outcome frameworks for experiential learning opportunities and develop a co-curricular recognition framework that institutions can utilize when implementing a form of recognition on their campuses. The provincial government should continue to support efforts of HEQCO to develop a system-wide learning outcomes framework for Ontario institutions and MTCU should provide envelope funding for the development and implementation of co-curricular recognition systems. Additionally, OUSA recommends that the provincial government provide funding for undergraduate research opportunities (UROPs) for undergraduate students in non-STEM fields, create bursaries and grants to lessen the financial burden of students who choose to undertake undergraduate research, and adopt UROPs as a metric used in Ontario's SMAs. Furthermore, students recommend that the provincial government provide incentives to businesses, government organizations, non-profits, or other relevant parties to create more placement opportunities for students and also offer financial assistance through grants or bursaries to reduce financial barriers associated with travel to mandatory student placements.

### Enhancing inclusive learning environments

Students recommend that the provincial government incentivize institutions to help faculty with the development and implementation of evidence-backed, differentiated evaluations through grant funding. Students would like to see HEQCO conduct research on the effectiveness and fairness of final examinations practices and establish a best practice framework for final examination pedagogy. Additionally, students recommend that the provincial government develop an inclusive education strategy at the PSE level with adequate consultation and that provincial government identify Equity and Inclusion offices as an essential service to be utilized as a resource for the creation of these trainings and invest in their creation and maintenance. Lastly, OUSA recommends that the provincial government mandate universities establish a baseline, minimum standard level of training to provide faculty and student-facing staff with inclusive educational tools and sensitivity training and also mandate that universities include a mandatory renewal cycle, not greater than five (5) years, to ensure training remains appropriate and relevant.