



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 140,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

## POLICY BRIEF: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

---

The concept of “disability” should be interpreted in broad terms including both present and past conditions as well as subjective components based on perceptions of disability. These subjective components determine disability in relation to individuals’ interactions with their environment: in the ways buildings are constructed, in the performance standards used to assess individuals, and in the ways individuals are expected to engage in daily activities. This interpretation of disability is referred to as a “social model” and places responsibility for overcoming accessibility barriers onto entire communities. This OUSA policy uses a social model of disability to offer recommendations that ensure all willing and qualified students in Ontario are able to access and excel within the post-secondary education system.

### THE PROBLEM

#### Negative Stigma and Limited Support

Accessibility and accommodation are not always recognized as distinct concepts. Without this distinction, individual accommodations are provided in lieu of initiatives that improve overall accessibility and create systemic change. When accessibility is not made a community matter, the responsibility to overcome barriers is placed on individuals. Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities to avoid this isolating social stigma.

Although support services exist on all OUSA campuses, they are not always accessible. Faculty and staff are not always provided with training that would enable them to help students navigate the variety of support services offered and little information is made widely available to incoming and current students. The responsibilities of Accessibility Offices are stretched thin and they face competing demands to advise students, train faculty and staff, and adhere to government legislation.

#### Complicated Academic Accommodations

Much work is being done to appropriately adapt curricula for a range of students with a range of capacities and abilities, but creating inclusive learning environments remains one of the largest challenges for education providers and their students. As a result, some level of individualized academic accommodation will always be required. Without the right accommodations, many students experience difficulty meeting their full academic potential. Worse still, full slates of accommodations often take too long to be implemented.

Processes for attaining accommodation are heavily bureaucratic and convoluted. Documentation standards across institutions remain inconsistent, varying between institutions and keeping approaches opaque and confusing. Students must submit their documentation

every semester, which can be time consuming and debilitating. Sometimes students are forced to stigmatize themselves by disclosing their diagnoses throughout the documentation process.

#### Financial Barriers

Despite existing financial aid programs, the barriers experienced by students with disabilities continue to grow. Part of the challenge lays in the way that the provincial and federal governments share their responsibility to assist these students; access to some federal grant programs is restricted to students with permanent disabilities. Another part lays in students’ lack of awareness of assistance programs. OSAP and admissions scholarships are not available for part-time students, thereby excluding students who reduce their course loads in order to manage their disabilities. These restrictions only serve to increase the proportion of students who must borrow from private lenders to finance their education.

#### Weak Legislation

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005* (AODA) was enacted to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for people with disabilities across Ontario. However, even with the AODA’s five regulatory standards that prescribe ways to dismantle barriers, students continue to face setbacks. Since many campuses are quite old, universities tend to be out of compliance with the *Building Code* and public sector building standards. Institutions typically leave advocacy on accessibility to the Accessibility Offices, leading to unsupported bottom-up approaches to change. This makes change slow and can be difficult for lower administration to navigate.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Remove Social and Systemic Barriers

All campuses must be free from social, physical, and academic barriers that limit accessibility for students

with disabilities and be spaces where disability is not a limitation. At the broadest level, this can be accomplished by incorporating Universal Design for Learning strategies into infrastructural, instructional, and strategic planning processes. In order to combat barriers at each campus, the provincial government must ensure institutions are following all available guidelines and policies for accommodating persons with disabilities while enacting students' own recommendations, including:

- Requiring all university Accessibility Offices to operate on social models of disability;
- Mandating that institutions provide comprehensive training to faculty, front line staff, and student leaders to help reduce and eliminate stigma;
- Integrating stigma reduction strategies into core annual events; and,
- Assuring that students have the autonomy to choose whether or not they want to disclose their diagnoses.

Comprehensive and flexible support services must be available for students with all types of disabilities. Adequate information about these supports should be available and widely publicized to current and prospective students prior to the start of each academic year. There are a variety of ways that information could be more effectively disseminated and funding more fairly allocated:

- Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) should list accommodation requirements and procedures for every Ontario campus;
- Government should outsource research into the most effective types of transition programs and ensure consistency across institutions;
- Information on disability services and summer transition programs should be readily available;
- Provincial government should provide enveloped funding for Accessibility Offices to ensure they have the resources they need; and
- Provincial government should consult with Accessibility Offices every two years to ensure current funding needs are being met.

### **Streamline Academic Accommodation Processes**

Academic accommodations must be consistent, reliable, and easily accessible. Proving the presence of a disability presents a significant barrier to students seeking academic accommodation and needs to be standardized across all post-secondary students. In doing so, institutions and the government can work to make documentation practices work better for students and limit redundancies. While Accessibility Offices should be responsible for the administration of accommodations, they should still be a priority for the whole university community. Faculty and staff need more sufficient training to enable them to assist students who need accommodations in their classrooms and institutions need more support in providing this training. Students recommend that:

- Accommodations be based on functional limitations, not diagnoses;
- Students with permanent disabilities not be required

to repeatedly seek documentation for the range of accommodations they need;

- OHIP and UHIP coverage include doctors' notes for students with disabilities;
- Accommodations be delivered in accordance with academic calendars;
- Interim accommodations be available while students are waiting for their full slate of accommodations; and
- Accessibility Offices be responsible for working with instructors and staff to implement students' accommodations.

### **Dismantle Financial Barriers**

All students with disabilities must be provided with adequate financial assistance to cover all costs associated with their university attendance and to decrease their reliance on private lenders. Accordingly, students' access to information about financial assistance programs must be increased to maximize the effectiveness of these programs. These principles could be realized if:

- Institutions and governments expanded the eligibility criteria for grants, bursaries, and scholarships to include students with temporary disabilities and those studying part-time;
- Provincial government lobbied federal government to expand the Canada Student Grant for Persons with Disabilities to cover the full cost of psychological assessments;
- OSAP did not expect students with severe permanent disabilities to contribute minimum pre-study amounts; and
- Provincial government partnered with Accessibility Offices to provide education and information about financial aid for students with disabilities.

### **Strengthen the AODA**

All universities must be compliant with the AODA by 2025. This will require institutions to adhere to all timelines referenced in the *Public Sector: 50+ Employees Standard* and make their annual accessibility reports public. All initiatives should be grounded in principles of dignity, independence, integration, and equal opportunity. We recognize universities experience difficulties with compliance in regard to their built environments as well as their academic and student service functions. An education standard would alleviate these difficulties; the province could use an education standard to:

- Address topics of physical access, support services, training, timelines, universal design, course materials, and awareness programming;
- Encourage senior administration to take leadership roles on campus;
- Require all areas on campus to be accessible, not just newly constructed or retrofitted buildings;
- Incentivize institutions to exceed minimum compliance standards;
- Require the provincial ombudsman to oversee issues of non-compliance; and
- Mandate that municipalities include meaningful student representation on accessibility advisory committees.