STUDENTS FOR ONTARIO’S FUTURE:
OUSA’S RESPONSE TO THE COUNCIL OF ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES’ FUTURING ON CAMPAIGN
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ABOUT OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight institutions 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.
INTRODUCTION

Today’s economy and social structures are ever-changing, becoming increasingly globalized. Now is the time to start a conversation about how Ontario can overcome the challenges the future holds and we are pleased to see the Council of Ontario Universities initiating the discourse. The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) believes it is crucial that this conversation include the leaders of tomorrow: today’s students. In this report, we outline students’ vision of the future, reflecting on their needs and principles for success. We have organized and formulated our responses according to the themes and conversation starters outlined.

New to the workforce, students are hard-working, creative, and bring innovative solutions to their communities. They have new approaches to ongoing problems and will help Ontario adapt to its changing landscape. By drawing on the talents that our students have to offer, we can secure the future of Ontario.

We must ensure that all students have equal opportunity to obtain a university education. Unfortunately, not all students have this opportunity. By balancing social cohesion, our province can ensure that all groups can succeed. As such, it is important that we work together as a society to advocate on behalf of marginalized students. All students in Ontario should have the ability and option to attend post-secondary, regardless of financial and household situations.

Students need to gain the transferable and technical skills needed to work in their chosen field throughout university. Furthermore, recent graduates must have the ability to articulate their skills and knowledge to their future employers. Ensuring that all students engage with experiential learning, and linking program curricula to learning outcomes, are important to achieving these goals. Experiential learning opportunities give students the practical skills necessary to enter the workforce. Ontario’s students can, and will, help build stronger industries and jobs for the future with the guidance and support of the post-secondary sector.
Municipalities can benefit from students’ fresh perspectives on local issues. By engaging with students, and working alongside them as partners, municipalities grant themselves the opportunity to **build a stronger sense of community** among current and future residents. Furthermore, stronger inter-regional transit services provide students with better opportunities to choose where they work and study. Establishing transit hubs at Ontario’s universities can effectively bring much needed services to rural, remote, and/or northern areas, as well as link the province’s urban centres more cohesively.

To develop strong, healthy leaders for the future, we must also learn to take care of them. University students sometimes struggle to cope during their time at school. It is important that universities not only provide academic opportunities for students, but also ensure their mental and physical wellbeing. Community and local health services are not able to handle large influxes of students in addition to their current residents. Universities must become effective wellness centres for students. In short, they must **promote good health and well-being** as well as high quality education.

Universities have the potential to shape Ontario’s future by providing for and nurturing current students. With the proper education and resources, students can succeed at their universities and beyond. Higher education not only benefits individuals, but also society as a whole. Wide spread university access can help breakdown systemic inequality, provide equal access to the labour market, create jobs within communities, and improve access to health care networks. By working collaboratively with local stakeholders, universities can play a crucial role in increasing economic productivity and quality of life for all Ontarians.
A university education is still an important mechanism for individuals to improve their quality of life and for the government to maintain economic productivity. Ontarians with a post-secondary degree are more likely to live longer, be healthier, commit fewer crimes, vote in larger numbers, donate to charity, and volunteer in their communities.\(^1\) Graduates themselves experience employment rates that are higher than those with only a high school or college diploma.\(^2\) Since children are likely to follow the educational paths of their parents, the benefits of increasing access to university will accrue over time, playing a role in breaking cycles of inequality and poverty.\(^3\)

All willing and qualified students in Ontario should be able to access and excel within Ontario’s universities. Universities should broaden their approaches to access and persistence to ensure students can choose the pathway that best suits their competencies, skills, and interests. There should be explicit focus on underrepresented groups and those who may not think a university education is an option for them. To these ends, universities should partner with municipalities, local school boards, youth organizations, and the provincial government to improve their outreach, pathway articulation, and retention efforts.

Barriers often arise from a combination of individual apprehension and limitations created by external expectations and socioeconomic factors. These barriers should never exclude students from earning a university degree when they are ready. Nor should structural barriers make it more difficult to enroll in university the longer an individual has been in the workforce. Prospective students who develop qualifications and interest in university education later than the completion of secondary school should have recourse to demonstrate their abilities and pursue university. Bridging programs, transfer pathways, and outreach initiatives offer viable alternative routes for non-traditional students to gain confidence and demonstrate university qualification as well as important mechanisms for universities to increase access to their institutions.
Any effort to evaluate existing programs, or develop new ones, should be made of collaborative efforts between community stakeholders (universities, school boards, municipalities, youth centres, local non-profits). Areas to address include: socio-economic limitations, academic shortcomings, informational barriers, and transition challenges. Strategies for outreach should be specific to the communities in which they are operated and developed. Special consideration must be given to incorporating a wide range of experiences, cultures, and diversities wherever possible.

Ensuring access to university is only one part of ensuring all citizens can thrive. Universities have a responsibility to advocate on behalf of their students to ensure the province makes the best use of the talents and contributions of all Ontarians. This is especially the case when not all students experience the same post-graduation success. All international students should be able to access the domestic labour market and encounter similar employment prospects as their domestic counterparts. Growth among the international student populations is highly valued by institutions, as the Council for Ontario Universities maintains “international students contribute significantly to excellence in education and research, bringing a diversity of perspectives, experiences and languages that enhance the university experience for all students.” However the sector could better articulate these students’ value by not treating them as visitors to the province, rather as potential residents. Available research suggests that international students are attracted to Canada’s permanent migration and employment opportunities. To maintain its place as a leader in international education and a fair society, Ontario must provide equitable employment opportunities to all its graduates.
OUSA’s students are excited about the province’s capacity for creativity and innovation across all sectors. Highly educated youth offer new insights and ideas that can help shape Ontario’s future. However, students and recent graduates cannot do this alone. It is essential that the university sector invest in their students so that they can achieve their entrepreneurial visions and reinvest in the province. Ontario’s prioritization of strong research and innovation is a mantle that all stakeholders must build upon if these goals are to be reached.

At present, not enough students have the opportunity or resources to explore entrepreneurship during their university career. Although the government acknowledges the need to innovate, Ontario has demonstrated persistently weak performance and economic growth in this regard. Furthermore, substantial student debt detracts many recent graduates from pursuing entrepreneurial endeavours. Government and institutional investment into exciting and promising new ideas is the key to unlocking the next generation’s innovative spirit. Entrepreneurial initiatives provide students with transferable skills that they do not receive in the classroom and are key components in increasing Ontario’s economic growth, prosperity, and productivity. All willing and qualified students should have the opportunity to participate. Entrepreneurship could be introduced to more students if the sector created new initiatives to support students, prioritized increasing entrepreneurial activity at universities, conducted research on new and existing programs, regulated intellectual property management standards to protect student researchers and incubator residents, and created incentives for employers to increase entrepreneurial activity.

Investing into Ontario’s future requires investing into the creative and innovative minds of its university students through entrepreneurial programming across all fields of study. This would inspire Ontario’s youth to strive for new and exciting ways forward, as well as establish a strong foundation of research and innovation to compete with other jurisdictions domestically and internationally.
OUSAs’s students know that the future labour market is one that will demand flexibility, adaptability, and transferability. As ambitious as undergraduates are to enter the workforce upon graduation, numerous barriers stand in the way of increasing the employment rates of highly educated youth. These barriers must be treated as distinct yet interconnected, and necessitate multifaceted approaches. OUSA envisions the government, employers, university administrators, and students working together to overcome these barriers and move towards a more prosperous, productive future for the province.

Expanding work-integrated or experiential learning opportunities are essential to the ongoing skills development of our university graduates. This can take the form of internships, co-operative work placements, practicums, capstone projects, and research positions. The personal, professional, and academic growth provided by these forms of learning will help Ontario’s youth engage with the province’s evolving labour market. It is also critical that these opportunities be extended to students across all fields of study and institutions across the province.

Recent graduates do not always have the technical skills that employers expect them to, yet employers do not provide their employees with substantial on-the-job training. Government subsidies have changed this in the past, however not all incentives are equally effective for small, medium, and large businesses. OUSA believes that employers are in the best position to provide technical training. They should be incentivized to reclaim their responsibility to train recent graduates in relevant technical skills. The province should specifically incentivize small and medium sized businesses, as well as not-for-profit businesses, to hire recent graduates.

Ontario’s post-secondary institutions lack a consistent taxonomy for communicating learning outcomes. Existing learning outcomes schemes are not articulated well and, in turn, cloud the purpose and efficacy of university instruction. This lack of common taxonomy limits students’ ability to articulate learning outcomes after they graduate. The lack of common nomenclature also impacts program development. Well-articulated learning outcomes reinforce high quality teaching.

It is imperative that Ontario’s universities employ the same learning outcomes schemes and apply them consistently across all educational levels. Skills-based learning outcomes should be easy for students to articulate when they are seeking employment or further education opportunities. Post-graduate outcomes could be improved if all Ontario universities provided program maps for their students. Experiential and work-integrated learning opportunities must be effectively linked to course and program curricula.

Ensuring that Ontario’s graduates are equipped with the cognitive and practical skills required for the jobs of the future – as well as the capacity to articulate their knowledge and skills to employers – will bolster Ontario’s human capital as it faces changes in technology and the labour market.
Students make up a significant portion of residents across many municipalities and both parties would directly benefit from meaningful and collaborative partnerships. One glaring motive for community partnerships stems from the province’s intention to expand work-integrated learning opportunities. Such opportunities allow students to build a wealth of varied skills, enabling them to give back to the communities in which they are living. Students can build local networks in their municipalities and bring in an outside perspective when solving local problems. These partnerships also encourage students to remain in these communities because of the options available to sustain them.

For rural and northern students, the availability of these aforementioned options are particularly valuable. Currently, most initiatives to retain students through employment in northern Ontario remain confined to the college sector, which discourages students from pursuing university education in these regions.6 These regions face ‘brain drain’ whereby northern students who graduate from university in southern Ontario do not return to the north. Young people take pride in their hometowns and should have the option to stay in the communities in which they were raised, and be given opportunities to help support them. Partnerships between Ontario’s rural and northern communities’ diverse markets and universities can provide these opportunities for students, while directly benefiting the municipality.

Examples of successful partnerships between universities and their municipalities already exist. CityStudio, located in Vancouver, connects City Hall staff, university students, and community members in the co-creation, design, and launch of projects that improve the city and enrich neighbourhoods. In a similar fashion, Ryerson University’s incubator, DMZ, has created 2681 local jobs and accelerated 282 local businesses.7 Municipalities and their universities should use these examples as best practices and develop similar partnerships that benefit their local communities.

Recognizing that students, residents, and community leaders all share common goals is a key first step to harnessing Ontario’s local talent. Universities should enable these groups to
How can Ontario support stronger communities, and how can municipalities work more effectively together at the regional level?

Stronger communities come from partnerships and cohesion between municipalities and their residents. There is often tension between students and local residents in near-campus areas as the quality of housing and community life can decay in these neighbourhoods. One significant step towards easing this tension and creating stronger communities comes from the conscious planning of these near-campus developments.

Municipalities should apply principles of mixed land use—or mixed-use zoning—to create environments where students and local residents can harmoniously inhabit the same neighbourhood. Municipalities and universities should advocate that this mixed-use approach to land usage be included in the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) as two parties with vested interests in improving the relationships between universities and their communities. The Ministries of Municipal Affairs and Housing use the PPS to regulate the development and use of land and support their goals of enhancing the quality of life for all Ontarians. Addressing near-campus neighbourhoods in the PPS will offer consistent guidance to municipalities as they seek to build healthy, safe, and livable cities.

There are organizations that exist to facilitate the cooperation between municipalities, however they have left out key stakeholders. Because they are missing key stakeholders, like students, they may not be addressing local issues effectively. For example, the lack of adequate inter-regional transit services is a common concern among students. This presents a barrier to accessing education and can prevent students from attending the universities of their choice. Students’ commute distances strongly influence their academic decisions; the further a student lives from campus, the less likely they are to travel there. Similarly, as students’ travel time between home and school increases so does the likelihood they will choose their courses based on the availability of transit options. While all residents have this concern, it is especially felt by Ontario’s students.

To connect students across Ontario to each municipality in which they have family, work, and school, a commitment to inter-regional transit strategies that allows students to move freely between municipalities must be prioritized. To achieve this goal, universities can be used as transit hubs across Ontario. This would allow for more efficient access to (and between) university communities. This can only be accomplished by incorporating multiple willing stakeholders. Then, students across Ontario can bring much needed services to rural, remote, and/or northern areas through university-community partnerships.
PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

In the future, not only will Ontario have to draw on the talents and resources of its citizens, but also of its institutions. Universities do more than educate their students and provide opportunities to participate in ground-breaking research, they also contribute to their students’ mental and physical wellbeing. Given that many community health services are already understaffed, they are not equipped to handle large inflows of students each year. By partnering with traditional providers in their communities, universities can become integral links within Ontario’s broader health care system.

Due to expanding enrollment and accessibility, Ontario’s universities are now host to a variety of populations with varied health care needs. Universities should have strategic goals, policies, and practices that reflect the importance of student wellness as a foundation for learning and success. Effective campus wellness services must also reflect the diversity within the student population. Universities are seeing tremendous growth among the number of students with mental illnesses and mental health disabilities; this growth is both in the volume of students and the increasing complexity of their health care needs. At the same time, students believe that health care services should be culturally relevant for Indigenous and international students, while also being capable of managing the unique health concerns of racialized students, transgender students, and students managing chronic illnesses.

Students’ health and wellness is best addressed through centres where health services, counselling services, and student accessibility services are integrated together. Institutions should move their student health and mental health services to a shared physical space. Crucial to providing students with the breadth of integrated health care services they require is the revision of the student health services funding model. An alternative to the fee-for-service funding model must be devised to enable on-campus physicians to give their student patients the assessment time they require, while also allowing on-campus clinics to hire and retain the allied health care practitioners they need.

On-campus medical clinics operate similarly to general practitioners in the broader community, meeting a variety of students’ health care needs on
an on-going basis. Because of this, universities have more to offer the health care system than research and human capital; they offer legitimate linkages between health care providers, especially for students who are transitioning between paediatric and adult mental health services. By promoting healthy lifestyle choices and coping strategies universities can offer an environment that eases students’ concerns related to culture shock, homesickness, loneliness, self-esteem, or identity in addition to meeting medical needs. Managing these issues early can potentially eliminate more serious health concerns later in students’ educational careers. Continued wellness programming and awareness should be incorporated throughout the academic year for all students. This approach would reinforce an understanding of health and wellness as interdependent.
The challenges that our province faces should be viewed as opportunities to improve the lives of all Ontarians. Ontario should aim to capitalize on the innovative and creative minds of its current students. As the vast majority of young people will attend post-secondary education, universities present unique sites to nurture and prepare these young minds for the future.

We must advocate on behalf of students facing barriers to education and provide all students equal access to university education. Creating the opportunity to develop job-ready skills through experiential learning can benefit students as well as their municipalities. Students can help solve local problems, gain necessary work experience, and enter the workforce already trained and prepared. We must also ensure that we take care of the physical and mental health of our youth. To achieve these goals, it is essential that tomorrow’s issues are addressed by tomorrow’s leaders: Ontario’s students.

ENDNOTES

2. Statistics Canada, “Table 282-0208 – Labour force survey estimates (LFS), by educational degree, sex and age group, unadjusted for seasonality, monthly (persons unless otherwise noted),” CANSIM Database, accessed February 21, 2017.
9. StudentMoveTO, An overview of early findings (Toronto: StudentMoveTO, 2016).