



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: ACCOUNTABILITY

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As publicly assisted institutions, universities have a variety of accountability mechanisms to ensure that they are adhering to public goals and priorities. Over the years, there has been no question as to whether or not institutions should be held accountable, due to their use of public dollars. Taxpayers and politicians alike still feel the need for universities to be accountable to government, despite the decline in government funding. In an effort to attempt to address this, the government developed Multi-Year Accountability Agreements with each institution. These agreements were designed with the intention of holding universities accountable to their own strategic initiatives, however, the framework failed to see much success. As a result, the government revised their accountability plan and created the Strategic Mandate Agreements, which are currently entering their second iteration. To improve accountability in the sector, students recommend that the province restructure their quality assurance processes, review and improve upon the Strategic Mandate Agreement framework, increase student representation on governing bodies, and expand Ombudsman services for students both on campus, and within Ombudsman Ontario.

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Lack of Appropriate Quality Assurance Processes**

Students believe that undergraduate degree expectations frameworks should adequately define what students should learn at each level of instruction. However, University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UUDLEs) are too vague and subjective, not adequately defining what a student should have learned after each level of instruction. As such, students are concerned that undergraduate programs are not being developed to the highest possible quality. Furthermore, concerns have been raised around the mechanisms that are currently in place for measuring quality in post-secondary programs. Currently, the evaluation criteria utilized by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance is largely self-measured by the member institutions of the Council of Ontario Universities. As an arms length organization of Ontario's publicly assisted universities, students believe that the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance has a perceived bias in program and course quality approval. Finally, the current program review cycle places newly created programs in the same category as previously established programs, running the risk of multiple cohorts of students receiving a lesser quality of education than their peers.

#### **The Need to Improve the SMAs**

OUSA believes that the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) have failed to improve upon the previous Multi-Year Accountability Agreement system. As such, students are concerned that the SMAs process has not been formally reviewed, resulting in the failure for the accountability mechanism to continuously adapt and

maintain relevancy in Ontario's changing post-secondary environment. Additionally, students are concerned about the siloed approach towards the development of SMAs. As a stakeholder group, students feel that all members of university communities are not adequately engaged in the development of institutional strategic directions. Furthermore, students have raised concerns regarding the performance metrics of the SMAs, highlighting the need for a comprehensive set of sector-wide post-secondary SMA metrics. Finally, the lack of a centralized location where SMA report back data could be publicly stored leaves a significant gap in the broader concept of post-secondary accountability. At present there is no central, publicly accessible location where stakeholders, such as students, can easily access and compare each institution's progress towards their strategic goals..

#### **Inadequate Student Representation**

Students are an important stakeholder in post-secondary education and should have a place in university governance that matches this role. Despite this, students are consistently underrepresented on governing bodies, resulting in their voices being overpowered by community members, alumni, faculty and administration. This concern is also reflected amongst governance committees, where the bulk of work for university senates and governing boards takes place. Furthermore, students are often required to declare a conflict of interest on matters such as tuition or ancillary fees due to the fact that they are responsible for paying these fees. These practices force students out of important conversations and decisions, despite their role as the current primary funders of Ontario's post-secondary institutions.

## **Insufficient Ombudsman Oversight**

Students are concerned about the state of independent accountability processes in Ontario's post-secondary sector. In Ontario, there has been an increase in student complaints both concerning academic and non-academic matters. Additionally, many institutions do not have an institutional Ombudsman office that is available to all students. When institutions do have Ombudsman offices, students are often forced to burden a portion of the full cost of operating the office. Furthermore, there is no office on a provincial level that is tailored specifically to students that can provide guidance around issues/concerns within the post-secondary sector. Finally, students are concerned about the variance of reporting standards for institutional Ombudsman offices, and the lack of a formal connection between institutions and the Ontario Ombudsman.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Improving Quality Assurance Processes**

High quality academic programs are essential to Ontario's university system. In order to better evaluate academic programs, the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance should revise the UUDLEs to model Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualification Profile learning outcomes. During this process, OUCQA should ensure that students are afforded the opportunity to provide input. Additionally, in an effort to improve the impartiality of program quality assurance, the Government of Ontario should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), to take on the quality assurance mechanisms of the current Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance. Furthermore, OUSA recommends that the body responsible for Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAPs) should only approve IQAPs that provide province wide metrics based on the evaluation of learning outcomes. These bodies should also develop cyclical program reviews that require feedback from current students and graduates. Finally, in an effort to ensure that all students are receiving a high quality education, the government should mandate, through its quality assurance processes, that new programs be reviewed after the graduation of the program's first cohort prior to moving to eight-year cyclical reviews. In the case that a new program fails its initial review, it should go under a two-year cyclical review process until it passes. If a program is to fail this two-year cyclical review process twice, the body responsible for IQAPs should reject the program following the completion of all current cohorts.

### **Re-envisioning the SMA Process**

As the province continues to create additional iterations of the SMAs, it is important for the framework to be continuously reviewed and improved upon. In order to accomplish this, students recommend that the government advisory panel of students, administrators, faculty, and sector partners to review and guide the development and implementation of the third iteration of SMA. Additionally, the province should mandate that universities must provide meaningful opportunity for

student association representation in the development of SMAs, while also establishing standards for consulting with the broader university community. Furthermore, as the government revises and reviews the Strategic Mandate Agreements, students believe that the province should adopt a model similar to the New Zealand Public Accountability Index model for the creation, review, and report-back processes of the SMA framework. Finally, the province should implement metrics that would provide a comprehensive measure of teaching excellence, research performance, community services, and general contributions, while also working with the broader post-secondary community to develop the mechanisms of an Ontario Public Accountability Index model. As institutions report back on the metrics outlined in their SMAs, the government should collect this data and centrally store it in a public manner.

### **Refining Governance Practices**

As post-secondary institutions continue to rely on revenues from student ancillary and tuition fees, there needs to be a shift in the role that students play in institutional governance. In order to reflect this, OUSA recommends that the government mandate a minimum of 13% of the voting seats on university governing boards, and 25% of the voting seats on university senates be allocated to undergraduate student representatives. Additionally, the province should amend any applicable university acts to allocate one undergraduate seat on each governing body to a representative from recognized student associations. Furthermore, the government should mandate that institutions provide student representatives with a reasonable opportunity to engage in discussion when decisions are being made on university governance committees, including decisions on tuition or ancillary fees.

### **Expanding Ombudsman Mechanisms**

Students believe that there is more that can be done as the province continues to extend accountability mechanisms over the post-secondary sector. Mirroring the creation of the Patient Ombudsman, students believe that the Government of Ontario should legislate the creation of a Student Ombudsman. Furthermore, students believe that the government should mandate that universities establish institutional Ombudsman offices on their campuses, and provide institutions with the funding necessary to adequately run those offices. OUSA also believes that the government should develop standardized reporting structures for institutional Ombudsman offices. Finally, Ombudsman Ontario should work with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development to formalize connections with institutional Ombudsman offices.