



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: A COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS STRATEGY

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**All willing and qualified students in Ontario should be able to access and excel within Ontario's post-secondary education system. Access, as a policy term, should have a singular meaning across Ontario that is separate from retention and persistence. The provincial government should reduce barriers to university access by developing and implementing a comprehensive access strategy. This strategy should holistically address all barriers to post-secondary education, ensuring equitable access to university for all Ontarians.**

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Uncoordinated Information & Ineffective Outreach**

Students are concerned about the lack of coordinated initiatives intended to increase university access in the absence of a government driven post-secondary access strategy. Without a strategy, the definition of access remains broad, as do access-related commitments in Strategic Mandate Agreements. Contributing to the sector's lack of direction in this area is the amount of data about access and transitions that are not reported, or worse, not collected. Data about the university sector is not centralized and is seldom published in useful or comparable formats. Furthermore, there is a dearth of racial demographic data. As a result, initiatives intended to increase access for underrepresented groups cannot always be evaluated.

Without centralized data, students, families, and communities have insufficient information about university pathways, the costs and benefits of university, and the availability of financial aid. While there are a variety of community- and institution-based outreach programs in operation, they lack the outcome metrics and government regulation to prove that they reduce the aforementioned informational barriers. Admittedly, outreach initiatives can be severely under resourced, for example, childcare and primary school settings lack resources to enable parents and guardians to plan and prepare for their children's higher education. Inadequate information and planning may limit learners' future opportunities.

Too often, access strategies are implemented as one-day programs that fail to connect to a larger framework or long-term strategy. Without early, on-going exposure to the possibility of higher education, parents and students may miss out on essential preparatory opportunities. This

is of particular concern for those whose parents do not hold university degrees—first generation students lack the financial literacy and pathway knowledge they need to make the best and most informed decisions for their educational futures.

#### **Inflexible Pathways**

As the final step, for most, before university, secondary school is a critical point in learners' educational careers. Unfortunately, curricular and streaming practices present barriers to certain students. Firstly, high school curriculum is predominantly Eurocentric and fails to acknowledge other valuable content from cultures and experiences that make up a significant portion of the school age population.

Secondly, students are required to make choices about their secondary school program (or stream) before they understand which courses are required for their preferred post-secondary pathway. When students are separated into streams, students from lower income groups have lower outcomes; most students from low-income families participate in applied streams that steer them away from university. Creating additional barriers, transferring between applied and academic streams is very difficult due to the limited availability of transfer credits, the undesirable times these courses are offered, and the cap on the number of secondary school credits a student may receive. Additionally, because the roles of guidance counsellors are not well defined, they are often faced with too many demands and there are not enough of them help all students.

Students who do not enter university directly from high school (non-traditional students) have skills, experiences, and credentials that are not consistently recognized by universities. These students also face stigma about their qualifications. Despite the role of the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) in enhancing transfer pathways between and within the college and university

sectors, many students' credentials remain unrecognized by their receiving institutions. Barriers to institutional transfers, in effect, create access boundaries for those trying to bridge the gap between their credentials from college or apprenticeship programs and workplace experience, and university programs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Create a Provincial Strategy**

Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) should be the central tool used for implementing a provincial access strategy. Institutional differentiation, while prioritizing access for underrepresented groups, should not diminish overall access to university education. Provincial performance-based funding should be associated with access initiatives outlined in SMAs. However, the Ministry should coordinate institutional specialization in SMAs.

#### **Centralize System Data & Information**

Public policy interventions supporting broadened access to Ontario's universities should rely on comprehensive data. Robust, accessible information can also help prospective students and their families overcome informational barriers. The government should convene an expert panel to examine and make recommendations regarding the collection, availability, accessibility, and publication of post-secondary data, with the ultimate goal being the standardization of universities' data collection practices. The Ontario Education Number should be used to collect important demographic information required to monitor progress on a comprehensive access strategy.

#### **Fund Outreach Programs**

Considered separate from institutional recruitment efforts, outreach programming needs to be specific to the communities in which they are operating and developed through consultation with relevant stakeholders. To these ends, the Government of Ontario should create a grant program specifically for outreach programs that prioritize the inclusion of underrepresented, marginalized, and low-income groups. Terms of reference for this grant should encourage collaboration between multiple stakeholders and lay out specific best practices to follow and outcome metrics to achieve. In this way, the government would be better equipped to evaluate the success and effectiveness of outreach programs in the long term.

#### **Strategize within Learner Segments**

A provincial access strategy should apply multiple interventions through different stages of a learner's educational career and start early. Parents and guardians need adequate finances and information prior to secondary school in order to prepare for their children's future education. Early childhood and elementary school experiences should provide comprehensive support for parents to access financial literacy education and post-secondary pathway planning information.

#### ***Secondary School Curriculum***

As students move into secondary school, the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education and Skills Development should ensure a broader range of source material that expresses more diverse cultural and social perspectives is used in the curriculum. The representation of a variety of identities should be emphasized as an access solution. The government should also continue to mandate that secondary schools increase financial literacy instruction, with a focus on increasing awareness of the costs of post-secondary education options.

#### ***Secondary School Streaming***

Academic limits should not be imposed on post-secondary opportunities before students are old enough to independently plan for their futures. Similarly, academic streaming should not be a mechanism that further disadvantages underrepresented groups. Any decisions made between university- and college-bound streams should be postponed to Grades 11 and 12. As long as streaming exists, the government should invest in better guidance support for students who are trying to decide what stream to enter. Finally, the Ministry of Education should make better efforts to support school boards and individual schools in implementing more efficient processes for transitioning between university and college streams.

#### ***Secondary School Guidance***

Guidance counselling represents a valuable opportunity to break down informational and other non-financial barriers to university. All students should have access to effective guidance counselling. To maximize the provinces' guidance counsellor capacity, the government should move away from a pure per-student funding formula of guidance counsellors towards a more targeted and responsive approach. The Ministry of Education should also more clearly define the role of guidance counsellors within the secondary school system. They should be mandated to receive regular skills training on OSAP and financial aid, processes for applying to post-secondary school, and university prerequisites.

#### ***Non-Traditional Pathways to University***

All students should be able to choose the university pathway that best suits their competencies, skills, and interests. Prospective students who develop interest in university education after completing secondary school should have options to demonstrate their qualifications. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should encourage, fund, and evaluate bridging programs to help otherwise qualified students access university education. They should reward institutions that prioritize bridging programs as part of their SMAs by providing performance funding to those who enhance academic support services and reducing costs for non-traditional students. ONCAT should be tasked with developing a robust, province-wide network of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.