POLICY PAPER
Rural & Northern Students

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All willing and qualified students from rural and northern communities should be able to access and excel within Ontario’s post-secondary education system. Ontario’s universities are in highly urbanized centers predominantly located in the south of the province. The remoteness of rural and northern students from these universities, combined with the diversity of their populations, means that barriers to university participation for youth in these areas have to be understood as complex, multifaceted, and interrelated. These factors are also compounded by the fact that post-secondary dropout rates are much higher in rural communities (14.8%) compared to the rest of Ontario (8.6%), which means these communities have lower proportions of university graduates, as well as fewer employment opportunities for degree holders.¹

It is important to recognize the unique challenges facing students from rural and northern Ontario, and to develop solutions attuned to the geographic, socio-economic, and cultural barriers they confront. These outcomes are not only relevant to students growing up and attending universities in rural and northern Ontario, but also to students from the south seeking to pursue their studies in the north. Students recommend that the province improve participation and persistence rates within Ontario universities serving rural and northern students, enhance infrastructure to provide inter-regional transit for rural and northern students, and strengthen work integrated learning via community partnerships to promote employment opportunities for rural and northern students. These policy recommendations will enhance the resiliency of these communities and its university undergraduates, providing long-term benefits to the province’s growth and human capital.

THE PROBLEM

Lower rates of participation and persistence
All secondary students in rural and northern communities should be provided comprehensive information regarding the opportunities to pursue university education in Ontario. However, these students are not exposed to the advantages of post-secondary education to the same extent as their urban equivalents, due to a lower proportion of university credentials amongst local populations. Rural and northern students are also at a high risk for factors causing low university persistence rates – such as inadequate preparation, social isolation, and financial need.

Lack of adequate transportation funding
Post-secondary students from rural and northern communities should have access to adequate, grant-based funding for the sake of travel to and from their family home. At present, the Ontario Distance Grant – Commuting is limited by the fact that it only provides assistance to students whose closest university is more than 80km from their family home, and only provides a maximum of $1500 per academic year. Additionally, the current Ontario Distance Grant – Travel is limited by the fact that it only provides a maximum of $300 per academic year for rural and northern students to relocate to their university’s municipality, which does not adequately support the associated costs. Neither of these grants take into consideration institutional strengths or relevant program offerings to the eligible students.

Poor infrastructure around inter-regional transit
Not all rural and northern students have access to inter-regional transportation services in order to attend their post-secondary institutions. In fact, many students travelling to and from their post-secondary institutions in rural and northern Ontario have limited inter-regional transportation options in order to attend university. The cost of commuting for rural and

¹ Mike Commito, Making the Grade? Education Trends in Northern Ontario, (Thunder Bay: Northern Policy Institute, 2015), 11.
northern students to and from their post-secondary institutions poses a significant financial burden.

**Under-resourced satellite campuses**
Satellite campuses in rural and northern Ontario should be able to provide the same quality and diversity of support services as the main campuses of universities. However, they often do not have the same resources as their respective main campuses, which jeopardizes the overall quality and diversity of the support services provided to their students. Another concern is that students attending satellite campuses in rural and northern Ontario often pay ancillary fees for services that only exist on the main campuses of their universities.

**Limited employment opportunities for recent graduates**
All university students from rural and northern Ontario should have access to work integrated learning opportunities, regardless of where they decide to pursue their education. However, not all universities serving these students have the capacity to provide work integrated learning opportunities across all fields of study. Rural and northern Ontario communities also struggle to provide effective employment outcomes for university graduates, causing a 'brain drain' towards the urban centers of southern Ontario.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Enhance participation and persistence**
All willing and qualified students from rural and northern Ontario communities should be able to access and excel within Ontario’s post-secondary education system. As such, the province should allocate funding to support outreach initiatives, such as Contact North, eINFO, and eCampusOntario, focused on educating rural and northern students on program-specific and university financial-literacy information. Provincially funded online resources should also be bolstered to encompass up-to-date information to assist rural and northern students who may not have the opportunity to physically attend an outreach event. It is also important to allocate funding to the development and maintenance of enrichment programs at rural and northern secondary schools. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should be the lead ministry on rural and northern student affairs, wherein a secretariat should be established to collect data and inform policy on the specific social and financial barriers facing university persistence of students from rural and northern communities.

**Provide more targeted funding for transportation costs**
Post-secondary students from rural and northern communities should have access to adequate, grant-based funding for the sake of travel to and from their family homes. The current Ontario Distance Grant - Commuting and Ontario Distance Grant – Travel should be rebranded to the Rural and Northern Commuting Grant and the Rural and Northern Travel Grant respectively. Both of these grants should be open to rural and/or northern OSAP eligible students, living 40km or more from the nearest publicly-funded institution, and be designed to allocate funding to students on a per-kilometer basis to nearest program-offering institution. Neither of these grants should provide less than their current per-student allocation. In the event that the eligible student is not accepted at the nearest program-offering institution, they should be able to appeal to receive the Rural and Northern Travel Grant to the nearest institution where they have been offered admission.

**Build robust inter-regional transit networks**
All students from rural and northern communities should have the ability to access and afford inter-regional transportation in order to attend their post secondary institutions. As such, the province should develop robust inter-regional transit networks serving students in these communities under the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario. It is also imperative to develop a sustainable long-term inter-regional transportation service plan with publicly funded universities and Metrolinx to ensure that they are accessible to all students.
**Invest in existing satellite campuses**
Satellite campuses should have adequate resources to provide a high quality education and a safe learning environment for all students. They should also play a relevant role in each institution’s strategic mandate agreement. As such, the province should invest in existing satellite campuses, rather than pursue the creation of new ones. It is essential that the province provide envelope funding or special purpose grants in order to enhance the level of support services at established satellite campuses serving substantial rural and northern student populations. Students should also have the ability to opt out of ancillary fees for services that are not available on their satellite campuses.

**Increase access to work integrated learning**
All university students from rural and northern Ontario should have access to work integrated learning opportunities, regardless of where they decide to pursue their education. As such, the province should provide targeted funding to support these communities in developing partnerships between universities and the college sector, as well as community industries. These funds would support work integrated learning opportunities in areas of growth within northern Ontario. The province should also strike a task force with direct student input to focus on post-secondary education, employment, and economic development in northern Ontario.
INTRODUCTION

Ontario’s rural and northern population is geographically dispersed and uniquely diverse in its demographics. Although rural and northern Ontario constitutes over 90% of the province’s landmass, only a minority of the population lives in these areas. Approximately 800,000 Ontarians live in rural and northern areas. OUSA’s recent biennial student survey found that about a third of the respondents reported coming from rural, northern, and/or First Nations Reserve communities.

While the terms “rural” and “northern” may imply that they describe relatively uniform populations, this is not the case. Rural can apply to individuals living in remote agricultural communities, in towns, or on First Nations reserves. Similarly, while people often consider “northern” to refer to populations living in isolated, small communities it is important to note that 30% of Ontario’s northern population resides in two cities with over 100,000 inhabitants each: Thunder Bay and Sudbury. Further complicating demographic matters, northern Ontario consists of 26% of the provincial Francophone population and 40% of the provincial Indigenous population. Moreover, there are 106 distinct Aboriginal communities in the north of Ontario.

For the sake of clarity, this paper will use the following definition of rural students: a student from outside of the census metropolitan areas of Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton, Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo, London, St. Catherine’s-Niagara, Oshawa, Windsor, Barrie, Greater Sudbury, Kingston, Guelph, Brantford, Thunder Bay, or Peterborough. Furthermore, this paper will define northern students as follows: a student from the census divisions of Kenora, Rainy River, Thunder Bay, Cochrane, Algoma, Greater Sudbury, Timiskaming, Nipissing, Manitoulin, or Parry Sound.

Despite the existence of a substantial, rural and northern population in Ontario, university education remains highly urbanized and predominantly located in the south. In fact, 16 of Ontario’s 20 universities are within 100 kilometers of Highway 401 running along the southern edge of the province. The remoteness of rural and northern students from these universities, combined with their diversity, means that barriers to university participation for youth in these areas have to be understood as complex, multifaceted, and interrelated.

These factors are also compounded by other concerning statistics. For example, 56% of residents feel the Ontario government is not adequately managing affairs in the north, while 67% of residents feel problems facing the north differ from problems facing the south. Furthermore, post-secondary dropout rates are a lot higher in rural communities (14.8%) compared to the rest of Ontario (8.6%), which means these communities have lower proportions of university graduates, as well as less employment opportunities for degree holders. Finally, the Canadian Community Health Survey revealed that men and women living in rural and small towns have a lower life expectancy than the average Canadian, and individuals living in rural and northern areas have higher than average rates of major depressive disorder.

The purpose of this policy paper is to analyze the unique challenges facing students from rural and northern Ontario, offering solutions attuned to the geographic, socio-economic, and cultural barriers students confront. However, the policy recommendations presented are not only relevant

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2 Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario, Rural and Northern Community Issues in Mental Health (Toronto, ON, 2009), 1.
4 Ibid.
5 Canadian Mental Health Association, Rural and Northern Community Issues in Mental Health, 1.
7 Mike Commto, Making the Grade? Education Trends in Northern Ontario, Thunder Bay: Northern Policy Institute, 2015), 11.
to students growing up and/or attending universities in these communities, but also to students from southern Ontario seeking to pursue a university degree in the north.

This paper will offer a series of key recommendations that are representative of the principles and concerns of Ontario undergraduate students. These recommendations will be aimed at the Ontario government specifically, with a respect for evidence-based policy maintained throughout. This paper will highlight and advocate for the following overarching goals: improved participation and persistence rates within Ontario universities for students coming from rural and northern communities, enhanced institutional infrastructure to provide essential services supporting health and wellbeing in northern Ontario universities, and strengthened commitment for work integrated learning and community partnerships to promote employment opportunities and skills development for students in rural and northern Ontario. These policy recommendations will enhance the resiliency of rural and northern Ontario and its university undergraduates, providing long-term benefits to the province’s growth and human capital.

It is our hope that these evidence-based policy recommendations are seriously considered by the provincial government and that we can work together to improve the accessibility, affordability, accountability, and quality of the university sector for students in rural and northern Ontario.
**ACCESSIBILITY**

**PARTICIPATION AND PERSISTENCE**

**Principle:** All willing and qualified students from rural and northern Ontario communities should be able to access and excel within Ontario’s post-secondary education system.

**Principle:** All secondary students in rural and northern communities should be provided comprehensive information regarding the opportunities to pursue university education in Ontario.

**Principle:** All Ontario university students from rural or northern communities should be supported in the unique challenges surrounding their pursuit of a university education.

**Concern:** Secondary students in rural and northern communities are not exposed to the advantages of post-secondary education to the same extent as their urban equivalents, due to a lower proportion of university credentials amongst local populations.

**Concern:** Secondary students in rural and northern communities often cannot access adequate outreach resources, such as the Ontario University Fair, which limits their capacity to make the most informed decisions on their post-secondary educational path.

**Concern:** Rural and Northern students are at a high risk for factors causing low university persistence rates – such as inadequate preparation, social isolation, and financial need.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should allocate funding to support outreach programs focused on educating rural and northern students on program-specific and university financial literacy information.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should support improvements to provincially funded online resources to encompass up-to-date information to assist rural and northern students who may not have the opportunity to physically attend an outreach event.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should allocate funding to the development and maintenance of enrichment programs at rural and northern secondary schools.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should appoint the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development as the lead ministry on rural and northern student affairs.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop a secretariat to work to collect data and inform policy on the specific social and financial barriers facing university persistence of students from rural and northern communities.

Students raised or currently living in Ontario’s rural and northern communities face unique challenges in accessing and succeeding within our province’s post-secondary education system. A lack of targeted outreach programming to rural and northern regions, coupled with low exposure to the value of post-secondary education, has led to an underrepresented rural and northern undergraduate student population within universities. The Ontario government must dedicate envelope funding to better inform rural and northern students on the advantages and opportunities apparent in pursuing a university education.

The irregular nature of work in rural and northern Ontario has led to the development of a largely entry-level workforce. Northern-focused industries such as mining, forestry, and hydroelectricity often boast entry-level seasonal work opportunities, while farming and agriculture do the same for rural Ontario. Despite no significant differences in overall high school graduation rates between northern and non-northern regions, many census districts of northern Ontario are shown to have a higher percentage of citizens that have not obtained any form of post-secondary
education compared to the provincial average. Northern Ontario census districts also show a higher unemployment rate than the provincial average. Furthermore, it has been found that a high unemployment rate itself has little to no effect on the enrolment rates of post-secondary institutions, but that the prospect of a higher-paying career is a major motivating factor for students. Financial support from the provincial government will help undergraduate institutions establish lasting connections with rural and northern populations, and thus will help prospective university students in establishing attainable goals for a successful career.

Increasing the post-secondary education rate for rural and northern students will also benefit the economic climate of rural and northern Ontario. It is widely known that there is a direct correlation between increases in post-secondary education rates and increased employment, and this holds true for rural and northern Ontario. University graduates in the rural-focused disciplines, such as forestry and agriculture, showed 100% and 89.5% employment rates respectively two years after graduation. A more educated population also increases economic growth through increased productivity, and encourages continued development within Ontario's rural and northern regions.

Current post-secondary outreach programs often neglect the needs of rural and northern students. Large-scale outreach events, such as the Ontario Universities Fair (OUF), are very rarely hosted outside of urban areas with high populations of incoming post-secondary students. These outreach programs are less likely to engage rural students due to their lengthy travel times. As such, they do not effectively reach potential university students drawn from rural and northern Ontario. An exception to this is the University Information Program, which involves more widespread outreach to rural and northern regions. However, this program is often hosted in more localized contexts (high school auditoriums) and does not attract the same level of institutional resources as the OUF.

There are currently many online outreach programs tailored to rural and northern students. Contact North is a provincially funded non-profit, tasked with undertaking outreach to northern communities regarding post-secondary programs. OUSA believes that increased financial support for Contact North will assist institutions in providing real-time outreach to secondary students from northern communities. Similarly, OUSA believes increased investment into eINFO and eCampus Ontario websites will help to provide general information regarding all Ontario universities to rural and northern students, for whom physically attending an outreach event may be difficult. Together, OUSA believes that Contact North, eINFO, and eCampus Ontario can provide an all-around university outreach experience to students from rural and northern areas, both online and in person.

Census data shows that careers requiring a university degree are much less common in northern Ontario when compared to the rest of the province. One secondary effect of this data is the lack of exposure for rural and northern secondary students to role models that have completed a university education. As a result, students are not exposed to the benefits of a university education during the period when they are determining their post-secondary future. Studies have shown that generational, peer-to-peer relationships, and parental education are essential to both

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13 “We're coming to you! Check out the University Information Program (UIP),” Ontario Universities Fair, accessed October 21, 2016, https://www.ouf.ca/uip/
university admission and persistence.\textsuperscript{15} As such, rural and northern students have a unique need for mentorship and knowledge sharing when it comes to the long-term benefits of a university degree.

Increasing the quantity and quality of outreach programs to secondary students is a crucial step to increasing the perceived importance of university-level education in rural and northern communities. OUSA recommends that the Ontario government develop envelope funding for post-secondary institutions to actively target their outreach efforts to rural and northern communities. This method of action will allow outreach on three fronts:

1. **Academic Program Content:** Increasing awareness of academic programs in which certain institutions excel.
2. **Financial Literacy for University:** Increasing the awareness in rural and northern communities of the financial support provided by both individual institutions and the provincial government for affording a university education.
3. **Non-Academic Institution Resources:** Increasing the awareness of the support services available to students of specific institutions.

OUSA believes that increasing awareness on these fronts will increase the matriculation rate of first-generation post-secondary students from rural and northern Ontario, who find lack-of-knowledge to be the primary barrier to obtaining a post-secondary degree.

OUSA also recommends that the Ontario government focus financial efforts on the enactment and maintenance of enrichment programs in rural and northern secondary schools. These can include, but are not limited to, International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement programs. It has been reported that the prevalence of such programs is significantly lower in rural communities, which limits the opportunities for students from these regions.\textsuperscript{16} Enrichment programs are known to better academically prepare secondary students for university education, as well as provide students with a better understanding of the rigor expected in a university course.

While publicly collected data proves a significantly lower university matriculation rate for rural and northern students, qualitative information on the reasons for such a discrepancy have yet to be collected. At present, there are four distinct ministries overseeing these populations: the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, and the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines.\textsuperscript{17} None of these ministries are responsible for addressing the post-secondary experience of rural and northern Ontarians. As such, OUSA recommends that the provincial government appoint the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) as the lead ministry on rural and northern student issues. This ministry should work to establish effective indicators for the success of policy surrounding the persistence through post-secondary education of rural and northern students in Ontario, and barriers thereto. Properly facilitated outreach to rural and northern students has the ability to drastically change their post-secondary participation and persistence in Ontario, and as such, should become a priority to the province of Ontario. The establishment of a secretariat within MAESD, which is composed of representatives from each of the above-mentioned ministries, would ensure that relevant and evidence-based data collection and policy is ensured.

\textsuperscript{15} “Chance of attending university still influenced by parents’ education,” *Huffington Post*, (February 12, 2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/12/14/parents-still-influence-university-chance_n_2298821.html
\textsuperscript{16} Jacqui Strachan, “Rural Ontario students missing out on enrichment programs,” (Toronto: People for Education, 2016).
TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

**Principle:** Post-secondary students from rural and northern communities should have access to adequate, grant-based funding for the sake of travel to and from their family home.

**Concern:** The current *Ontario Distance Grant – Commuting* is limited by the fact that it only provides assistance to students whose closest university is more than 80km from their family home with a maximum of $1500 per academic year.

**Concern:** The current *Ontario Distance Grant – Travel* is limited by the fact that it only provides a maximum of $300 per academic year of financial support for rural and northern students to relocate to their university’s municipality, which is does not adequately support the associated costs.

**Concern:** The *Ontario Distance Grant – Travel* is limited by the fact that it only provides assistance to students whose closest university is more than 80km from their family home, which does not consider institutional strengths or relevant program offerings.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should rebrand the *Ontario Distance Grant – Commuting* to the *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant*.

**Recommendation:** The *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant* should be open to rural and/or northern OSAP eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly-funded institution.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should increase the monetary grant amount allocated to recipients of the *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant*.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should rebrand the *Ontario Distance Grant – Travel* to the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant*.

**Recommendation:** The *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* should be open to rural and/or northern OSAP eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly funded institution.

**Recommendation:** The *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* should be designed to allocate funding to students on a per-kilometer basis, from family home to nearest program-offering institution, with a minimum allocation of $300 per academic year.

**Recommendation:** In the event that a rural and/or northern student is not accepted at the nearest program-offering institution, they should be able to apply to receive the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* to the nearest institution where they have been offered admission.

The current model for allocating travel funds does not fairly consider the needs of students originating from rural and northern communities. As a result, students with financial need, whose parents reside in rural and northern communities, are not able to travel to and from their family home as frequently as their urban counterparts. The lack of transit infrastructure in rural and northern areas puts students originating in these areas at a high risk of transportation disadvantage.\(^\text{18}\) This will be expanded upon in the following section on Infrastructure.

Data shows the associated costs of living away from home in a university setting have been rising steadily. On average, the cost of shelter alone in Ontario has risen over 8.2% since 2011.\(^\text{19}\) The proposed changes to the *Ontario Distance Grant – Travel* (restructuring it to become the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant*) have the ability to help offset the costs for the majority of rural and

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northern students, who must relocate in order to obtain a university-level post-secondary education.

Currently, the *Ontario Distance Grant – Travel* awards $300 per academic year to OSAP-eligible students, living more than 80km from the nearest publicly assisted university.\(^{20}\) Similarly, the *Ontario Distance Grant – Commuting* awards $500 per academic semester (up to $1500 per academic year) to OSAP eligible students, living more than 80km from the nearest publicly assisted university.\(^{21}\) OUSA believes in differentiating the needs of commuting and travelling students, and sees the need for an important distinction between the costs for relocation, and the costs of regular travel.

OUSA believes the program choices made by students with financial need should not depend on the location of their family home. The Ontario government can acknowledge the right of a university applicant to select their program of choice by decreasing the “closest institution” restrictions that currently limit the scope of the distance grants, and changing this restriction to only include universities offering the specific program of a rural or northern student’s choice.

Youth originating from family homes in rural and northern Ontario are at a high risk for developing a transportation disadvantage. The lack of developed transportation infrastructure increases the need for a personal vehicle to travel. However, in low-income areas of rural and northern Ontario, the costs associated with owning and maintaining a vehicle are not feasible for most families. The combination of these factors has created a financial barrier to rural and northern student accessibility within the university sector.

OUSA believes the Ontario government must work to restructure the *Ontario Distance Grant – Commuting* and transform it to the *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant* by lowering the “closest institution” restriction of 80 kilometers to a distance of 40 kilometers. This will work to ensure that appropriate funding is allocated to students who must regularly travel long distances to obtain a post-secondary education. Congruently, OUSA recommends the Ontario government work to restructure the *Ontario Distance Grant – Travel* and transform it into the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* by also lowering the “closest institution” restriction of 80 kilometers to 40 kilometers, and allocating funding on a per-kilometer basis, based on the closest institution offering the student’s program of choice. This change will enable more rural and northern students to afford the cost of living in southern Ontario, and will thus effectively work to remove a major barrier for the pursuance of post-secondary education by these demographic groups.

OUSA is committed to including students who are not necessarily accepted to their closest program-offering institution, and as such, believes in including the opportunity to prove non-acceptance as an important part of the application to the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant*. As such, in the event that a rural and/or northern student is not accepted at the nearest program-offering institution, they should be able to apply to receive the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* to the nearest institution where they have been offered admission. This allows students from these communities to maintain a broader accessibility to the post-secondary sector without being negatively impacted by continued movements toward institutional differentiation.


INFRASTRUCTURE

INTERREGIONAL TRANSIT

**Principle:** All students from rural and northern communities should have the ability to access and afford inter-regional transportation in order to travel/commute to and from their post-secondary institutions.

**Concern:** Not all rural and northern students have access to inter-regional transportation services in order to attend their post-secondary institutions.

**Concern:** Many students travelling to and from their post-secondary institutions in rural and northern Ontario have limited inter-regional transportation options in order to attend university.

**Concern:** The cost of commuting for rural and northern students to and from their post-secondary institutions poses a significant financial burden.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should implement robust inter-regional transit networks serving students in these communities under the *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario*.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should develop a sustainable long-term inter-regional transportation service plan with publicly funded universities to ensure that they are accessible for all students.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should mandate or coordinate with Metrolinx to ensure that daily student commuters have access to inter-regional transportation services in rural and northern Ontario.

There are specific barriers to post-secondary education that are faced by rural and northern students in relation to infrastructure. One of the most prominent infrastructural barriers is the lack of reliable inter-regional transit options available for students from rural and northern Ontario. Access to affordable transportation is essential for both university campuses in northern Ontario, as well as rural and northern students that prefer to commute to and from their post-secondary institutions. All universities in northern Ontario, and all universities serving rural populations, should give students the ability to access inter-regional transportation services through their annual fees.

While many universities provide student passes for municipal transit through their current fees, many northern institutions have limited transportation options available for their students due to broader issues in infrastructure. Furthermore, these municipal transit options are only beneficial to students who relocate to live on or near their respective campuses. For students coming from rural and northern communities, these municipal transit options are insufficient for daily commuters. The lack of inter-regional transit serving rural and northern Ontario is also a serious barrier for students to attend university, as it restricts the capacity for these students to visit home and/or commute to campus regularly. As mentioned in the previous section, this creates an unfair necessity to own a vehicle, which is costly and time consuming for students.\(^\text{\textsuperscript{22}}\)

The lack of infrastructure is a direct result of the Ontario government’s reduction or elimination of inter-regional transportation options in rural and northern Ontario. In recent years, the province cut public subsidies for the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission (ONTC) buses and eliminated passenger rail.\(^\text{\textsuperscript{23}}\) The province announced that it was taking a new approach

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\(^{22}\) Noxon Associates Limited, Improving Travel Options in Small and Rural Communities. Transport Canada, TP 14945E, 2009.

to the ONTC in order to protect the northerner’s health and education system. Rick Bartolucci, who was the Minister of Northern Development and Mines in 2012, stated that “[they were] taking this action to ensure that northeastern Ontario benefits from a sustainable, effective transportation system by finding new providers for services currently operated by the ONTC”. However, this scaling back process, which is continuing at present, places significant limitations on rural and northern students to access post-secondary education. The overreliance on automobile travel has resulted in the provincial government needing to subsidize students to make up for the cost of commuting and travel. To counter this trend, the provincial government should develop and implement a plan for a sustainable long-term inter-regional transportation service in order to ensure that students from rural and northern Ontario are able to commute to and from their post-secondary institutions at a reasonable cost.

The need for robust inter-regional transit networks serving rural and northern Ontario is not new or unprecedented. The province has addressed the concerns raised in this section in the past. For instance, as stated in the Growth Plan in Northern Ontario, 2011 by the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, “[a]n integrated, long-term transportation plan is needed to maintain and enhance the North’s transportation infrastructure and to improve connectivity among the various modes of travel”. Despite recognizing this as being essential to the infrastructure growth of the province, these plans have yet to come to fruition.

OUSA believes that the provincial government should invest and expand one of its current agencies, Metrolinx, to address some of these recommendations. Metrolinx is mandated “to provide leadership in the co-ordination, planning, financing, development and implementation of an integrated, multi-modal transportation network...[It] is also responsible for the operation of the regional transit system, GO Transit, the PRESTO electronic fare payment system and the UP Express airport rail link”. This mandate should be expanded towards long-term sustainable planning for inter-regional transportation in rural and northern Ontario. It should also ensure that such planning is done through evidence-based policy with relevant stakeholders and non-government organizations.

It is essential for the provincial government to initiate these plans with Metrolinx so that the implementation of GO bus/rail or connecting services in southern Ontario do not negatively impact projects intended for rural and northern populations. Ideally, these expanded inter-regional transit networks would include both rail and bus services relevant to each rural and northern community. Finally, efforts should be made to maintain affordable costs within these inter-regional transit networks. Recent expansions of GO and UP services have been met with high fares, which if replicated in rural and northern Ontario could undo the accessibility that is intended through such a system. Such a network would not only benefit rural and northern students seeking to pursue a university degree at institutions across the province, but it would also encourage southern Ontario students to consider opportunities in the north.

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**SATELLITE CAMPUSES**

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<th><strong>Principle:</strong></th>
<th>Satellite campuses should directly align with the province’s differentiation policy framework and provide programs relevant to their respective rural and northern communities.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Principle:</strong></td>
<td>Satellite campuses in rural and northern Ontario should be able to provide the same quality and diversity of support services as the main campuses of universities.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle:</strong></td>
<td>Satellite campuses should have adequate resources to provide a high quality education and a safe learning environment for all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern:</strong></td>
<td>Existing strategic mandate agreements (SMAs) do not adequately articulate the role of satellite campuses in ensuring institutional differentiation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern:</strong></td>
<td>Satellite campuses often do not have the same resources as their respective main campuses, which jeopardizes the overall quality and diversity of the support services provided to their students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern:</strong></td>
<td>Students attending satellite campuses in rural and northern Ontario often pay for ancillary services that only exist on the main campuses of their universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendation:</strong></td>
<td>The provincial government should mandate satellite campuses in rural and northern communities to comply with the Ontario differentiation policy framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendation:</strong></td>
<td>The provincial government should establish envelope funding or special purpose grants in order to enhance the level of support services at established satellite campuses serving substantial rural and northern student populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendation:</strong></td>
<td>Students should have the ability to opt out of ancillary fees for services that are not available on their satellite campuses.</td>
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Satellite campuses in rural and northern Ontario allow more students from these regions to attend university and decrease the need for long-distance commuting. Over the years, satellite campuses have become more appealing for students that prefer to be educated in smaller settings that promote the ability to personally connect with their peers and educators.\(^2^8\) The significance of satellite campuses has not only benefited the students but also increased many opportunities in the municipalities. Furthermore, satellite campuses aid in preventing “the uneven spread of education in Ontario”, and they are “strategic in providing education to [their] local area[s]”.\(^2^9\)

Although satellite campuses are very beneficial for students, they need to be capable of providing their students with the support services and resources representative of a quality university education. Unfortunately, many satellite campuses do not have adequate resources to provide a high quality education and safe environment for students in relation to the main campuses. Nevertheless, students attending satellite campuses are still expected to pay similar tuition and ancillary fees as their peers at the main campuses.\(^3^0\) This is not fair for students attending a satellite campus, as they do not have access to the full slate of support services and resources accessed by their main campus peers. As such, students from the satellite campuses should have the ability to opt out of ancillary fees for services that do not exist for them. To guarantee a higher quality university experience it is essential that the province provide institutions with appropriate funding allocations for each of their satellite campuses.

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\(^{2^9}\) Ibid.  
provide programs relevant to their respective rural and northern communities. Existing strategic mandate agreements (SMAs) do not adequately articulate the role of satellite campuses in order to ensure institutional differentiation, nor are there any mandates from the government to have institutions report this explicitly. Thus, the provincial government should mandate that current satellite campuses must comply with the Ontario differentiation policy framework. This approach supports various policy goals of the province, including the Major Capacity Expansion Policy Framework, which states their priority is “ensuring that future large-scale capacity expansion supports long-term post-secondary education priorities, including institutional differentiation”.

Students attending any satellite campus should be receiving all of the support services necessary to succeed academically and personally. However, the overall capacity for institutions to do this varies significantly from one satellite campus to another. Furthermore, many satellite campuses are under-resourced, which forces students to go to the main campus or a nearby college to complete their degree/program. To address these concerns, the provincial government should develop funding for satellite campuses in order to grow and provide adequate resources to ensure high quality education for all students in rural and northern Ontario. Effective programming development is essential for satellite campuses to grow, and OUSA agrees with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations in their vision: “access to the full range of library, research resources, and staff typical of a university... access to a full range of student services, including financial support; and access to recreational, social, and other programming to round out the academic experience”.

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33 Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, Policy Position on Satellite Campus, (Toronto: ON, 2009), 10.
**EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

**Principle:** All university students from rural and northern Ontario should have access to work integrated learning opportunities, regardless of where they decide to pursue their education.

**Principle:** Universities located in northern Ontario must be able to institute specialized programs and college partnerships to ensure the quality and sustainability of their services.

**Principle:** Rural and northern Ontario students should be able to develop the skills needed to ensure their success and employability in any part of the province.

**Concern:** Not all universities serving rural and northern Ontario students have the capacity to provide work integrated learning opportunities across all fields of study.

**Concern:** Rural and northern Ontario communities struggle to provide effective employment outcomes for university graduates, causing a ‘brain drain’ towards the urban centers of southern Ontario.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide targeted funding for work integrated learning opportunities in areas of growth within northern Ontario.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide financial incentives for universities to create and implement partnerships for work integrated learning opportunities in rural and northern Ontario communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should strike a task force with direct student input to focus on post-secondary education, employment, and economic development in northern Ontario.

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is a key success factor and a great benefit to all students at the post-secondary level. OUSA envisions and encourages a conceptualization of WIL that encompasses various forms of experiential learning beyond the traditional views of co-ops and internships. With university students studying in various disciplines in all parts of the province there is a need for adequate experiential learning opportunities to coincide with course/program curricula. WIL provides university students the opportunity to grow academically, personally, and professionally while completing their studies. However, the vast majority of initiatives to retain students through employment in northern Ontario remain confined to the college sector, which restricts students from pursuing university education in these regions.  

The ‘brain drain’ concern has been an issue facing rural and northern students in recent years. OUSA’s biennial student survey found that 75% of northern students who graduate from a post-secondary institution in southern Ontario choose to stay in that area instead of returning to the north. This relocation process to the southern urban centres perpetuates the status quo, as northern students pursuing university education do not often return home to serve as mentors to future cohorts. This is also compounded by the fact that the population of rural and northern Ontario is on a steady decline; rural and small town populations aged 20-44 dropped 26% from 2001-2011, while northern populations declined by about 2.2% in that same period. Providing targeting funding tailored to attract university students to return to their respective communities will prevent this continued phenomenon of out-migration.

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37 Commito, Making the Grade? Education Trends in Northern Ontario, 8.
One way to achieve this is through providing universities with funding to create and implement more comprehensive work integrated learning programs by leveraging networks and enterprises present in those communities. Work integrated learning opportunities are not always available for all programs in certain areas. As such, the provincial government should allocate funding resources to institutions so that students can travel to obtain a work integrated learning experience where available. With additional funding, institutions will also be able to fund the resources necessary to ensure that the support and programs are available for students to participate in work integrated opportunities within their communities. Institutions would then have the ability to devote resources specifically to a work integrated learning program, giving more students the opportunity to take advantage of the experience. As we begin to train a hands-on generation to enter the workforce, more and more resources must be available not only to assist the employer with the cost of recruitment, but also for the institution to have the necessary resources to offer experiential opportunities.

As discussed earlier, rural and northern students do not fall within the scope of one particular ministry. It is for this reason that OUSA recommends the government establish a taskforce for the sole purpose to focus on rural and northern students. This would effectively lead to the development of strengthened education and economic development in these regions. This taskforce should have rural and northern student representation so that they may provide the necessary feedback to create successful progress. It would also include valuable stakeholders such as university administrators, industry partners and relevant sector professionals to ensure the recommendations it puts forth are comprehensive. The goals of the taskforce would be to address the persistent issues and barriers that students in rural and northern Ontario face, particularly in transitioning into the labour market after graduation. It would also offer insights into integrating undergraduates as a means to bolster the economic prosperity of rural and northern Ontario. OUSA recommends that this taskforce be established and offer a preliminary report within one to two years in order to ensure that it can address these barriers in a timely fashion.

Specialized programs will be the key to success for northern Ontario institutions to ensure their graduates’ prosperity in the future. Two of the four northern Ontario universities, Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and Laurentian University in Sudbury, have made it their mission to institute new innovative programs to entice students to leave the more suburban areas of Ontario and begin to migrate north for studies and employment. Laurentian has made strides to invest millions of dollars into programs such as mining engineering and, with help from the provincial and federal governments, the largest amount in university history for geological studies. Lakehead has taken a different focus over the past few years and instituted northern Ontario’s first law school with a focus in Indigenous relations.

Employers are seeking university graduates with transferable skills and a certain level of job experience. In traditional university contexts, these types of experiences are less likely to occur. With a steadily declining population in northern Ontario, it is imperative that skills development and employment opportunities receive greater focus. This is challenged by the current high unemployment rates in northern Ontario, which make it difficult to offer work integrated learning opportunities to students living and studying in these regions. The provincial government must direct funding towards universities serving rural and northern students so that they can provide more WIL opportunities and continue to develop a highly skilled workforce across Ontario, rather than just the urban centres of the south. Specific envelope funding should be available for universities in northern Ontario to provide their students with experiences relevant to their respected field in a rural and/or northern community. Finally, the provincial government should

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40 "New research, innovation and engineering building announced at Laurentian University," CBC News (September 23, 2016), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/laurentian-engineering-building-funding-1.3776214
42 Comitito, Making the Grade? Education Trends in Northern Ontario, 11.
consider re-instating the cancelled wage subsidy program, or creating and establishing new programs, to work simultaneously with the federal government’s Co-operative Education Tax Credit for employers.⁴³

Ontario’s rural and northern communities are based on diverse markets that include agriculture and mining. As such, the provincial government should allocate resources from multiple agencies to provide funding and programming to ensure a relevant and skill-based job market is awaiting these university graduates. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development also needs to allocate more finances to promote partnerships for universities and colleges to combine programs that are beneficial for the employment sector of rural and northern Ontario. Most importantly, it is essential for a new framework to exist at the government level, as the labour demands required in these regions are unique and distinct from those of southern Ontario’s urban centres. Only by implementing rural and northern perspectives and experiences into provincial policy, will there be renewed capacity for genuine skills development and employment opportunities to thrive for university students coming from Ontario’s more remote communities. These recommendations directly align with the Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel report published in June 2016, and should therefore be implemented in the province’s rural and northern communities wherever possible.⁴⁴

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POLICY STATEMENT

Rural & Northern Students

Whereas: All willing and qualified students from rural and northern Ontario communities should be able to access and excel within Ontario’s post-secondary education system.

Whereas: All secondary students in rural and northern communities should be provided comprehensive information regarding the opportunities to pursue university education in Ontario.

Whereas: All Ontario university students from rural or northern communities should be supported in the unique challenges surrounding their pursuit of a university education.

Whereas: Post-secondary students from rural and northern communities should have access to adequate, grant-based funding for the sake of travel to and from their family home.

Whereas: All students from rural and northern communities should have the ability to access and afford inter-regional transportation in order to travel/commute to and from their post-secondary institutions.

Whereas: Satellite campuses should directly align with the province’s differentiation policy framework and provide programs relevant to their respective rural and northern communities.

Whereas: Satellite campuses in rural and northern Ontario should be able to provide the same quality and diversity of support services as the main campuses of universities.

Whereas: Satellite campuses should have adequate resources to provide a high quality education and a safe learning environment for all students.

Whereas: All university students from rural and northern Ontario should have access to work integrated learning opportunities, regardless of where they decide to pursue their education.

Whereas: Universities located in northern Ontario must be able to institute specialized programs and college partnerships to ensure the quality and sustainability of their services.

Whereas: Rural and northern Ontario students should be able to develop the skills needed to ensure their success and employability in any part of the province.

Be it resolved that: The provincial government should allocate funding to support outreach programs focused on educating rural and northern students on program-specific and university financial-literacy information.

Be it further resolved that: The provincial government should support improvements to provincially funded online resources to encompass up-to-date information to assist rural and northern students who may not have the opportunity to physically attend an outreach event.

BIFRT: The provincial government should allocate funding to the development and maintenance of enrichment programs at rural and northern secondary schools.

BIFRT: The provincial government should appoint the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development as the lead ministry on rural and northern student affairs.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop a secretariat to work to collect data and inform policy on the specific social and financial barriers facing university persistence of students from rural and northern communities.
BIFRT: The provincial government should rebrand the *Ontario Distance Grant - Commuting* to the *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant*.

BIFRT: The *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant* should be open to rural and/or northern OSAP eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly-funded institution.

BIFRT: The provincial government should increase the monetary grant amount allocated to recipients of the *Rural and Northern Commuting Grant*.

BIFRT: The provincial government should rebrand the *Ontario Distance Grant - Travel* to the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant*.

BIFRT: The *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* should be open to rural and/or northern OSAP eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly funded institution.

BIFRT: The *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* should be designed to allocate funding to students on a per-kilometer basis, from family home to nearest program-offering institution, with a minimum allocation of $300 per academic year.

BIFRT: In the event that a rural and/or northern student is not accepted at the nearest program-offering institution, they should be able to apply to receive the *Rural and Northern Travel Grant* to the nearest institution where they have been offered admission.

BIFRT: The provincial government should implement robust inter-regional transit networks serving students in these communities under the *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario*.

BIFRT: The provincial government should develop a sustainable long-term inter-regional transportation service plan with publicly funded universities to ensure that they are accessible for all students.

BIFRT: The provincial government should mandate or coordinate with Metrolinx to ensure that daily student commuters have access to inter-regional transportation services in rural and northern Ontario.

BIFRT: The provincial government should mandate satellite campuses in rural and northern communities to comply with the Ontario differentiation policy framework.

BIFRT: The provincial government should establish envelope funding or special purpose grants in order to enhance the level of support services at established satellite campuses serving substantial rural and northern student populations.

BIFRT: Students should have the ability to opt out of ancillary fees for services that are not available on their satellite campuses.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide targeted funding for work integrated learning opportunities in areas of growth within northern Ontario.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide financial incentives for universities to create and implement partnerships for work integrated learning opportunities in rural and northern Ontario communities.

BIFRT: The provincial government should strike a task force with direct student input to focus on post-secondary education, employment, and economic development in northern Ontario.