

**POLICY PAPER**

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***Rural & Northern Students***

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## ABOUT OUSA

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OUSA represents the interests of 150,000 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.

The member institutions and home office of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance operate on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Leni-Lunaape, Anishnawbek, and Mississauga peoples.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Rural and northern students face many of the same barriers to access and persistence in post-secondary education as students from southern or urban centres. However, they also face many challenges that are specific to their geographic regions, and many of the solutions that are proposed for southern and urban students will not be effective for those students living in or coming from a rural and/or northern setting. Recognizing the unique experiences of rural and northern students is an important step in improving the affordability, accessibility, accountability, and quality of post-secondary education in our province.

### THE PROBLEM

Students are concerned about the inequitable barriers that rural and northern students face to access and persist in post-secondary education. The following are a number of the concerns that students identified based on existing research and consultation with students at OUSA's member institutions.

#### ***Post-secondary Access Barriers***

Individuals from rural and northern areas experience lower enrolment in post-secondary education compared to their counterparts in southern, urban areas. Due to the lack of early-targeting and recruitment strategies from post-secondary institutions, secondary students in rural and northern communities have fewer opportunities to learn about the advantages of, and options for, post-secondary education, which limits their ability to make the most informed decisions on their post-secondary educational path. Indigenous students in rural and northern communities do not receive sufficient information about post-secondary education options early enough in their educational career, and are less likely to complete post-secondary programs below the bachelor's level.

Rural and northern students also face access barriers as a result of fewer and more costly transportation options. The elimination of the Ontario Distance Grant - Travel has resulted in financial barriers to post-secondary education for students from rural and northern areas and the model used for calculating Ontario Student Grants does not explicitly or transparently factor in distance-related travel costs for rural and northern areas. This is exacerbated in emergencies as students needing to travel long distances to return to their place of permanent residence from their institution in the event of an emergency are not able to access financial support to supplement the cost of travel.

Access barriers are greater for Francophone and Indigenous students, as well as students with disabilities, in rural and northern regions. Many post-secondary institutions in Ontario do not provide support in French and Indigenous languages, and northern post-secondary institutions face unique budgetary challenges compared to those in southern, urban areas which can result in varying quality and quantity of accessibility services and an inability to modify existing infrastructure to adhere to basic accessibility guidelines.

#### ***Infrastructure Barriers***

Rural and northern regions face challenges to providing transportation and internet/technology infrastructure, which disadvantages students in these areas. Not all rural and northern students have access to inter-regional transportation services to attend their post-secondary institutions or co-op/placement positions. The cost of daily commuting for rural and northern students to and from campus poses a significant financial burden and inclement weather can further impede access for these students. Private sector internet providers are not effectively incentivized to support access to, and the development of, quality internet service in rural and northern areas and mandatory software that some post-secondary courses require are not freely available at northern post-secondary institutions.

There are few satellite campuses that are geographically accessible to rural and northern communities and existing strategic mandate agreements do not adequately articulate the role of satellite campuses in ensuring institutional differentiation under the province's differentiation policy framework. Given their smaller student populations, satellite campuses often do not have a sufficient level of financial support to

offer quality and diversified support services to their students and are often reliant on part-time or overworked faculty and staff to educate and support their students. Students attending satellite campuses in rural and northern regions often pay for ancillary services that only exist on the main campuses of their universities.

### ***Unsupportive Campus and Community Climate***

There is limited research and information surrounding the issues rural and northern students may face in attending post-secondary institutions, as well as a lack of understanding of how certain policies may affect rural and northern students in comparison to their southern, urban counterparts.

Northern institutions have greater Indigenous student populations than southern, urban institutions, yet Indigenous students at northern institutions often do not feel represented on their campuses leading to further isolation and marginalization. This is, in part, because northern institutions often do not dedicate permanent physical space for Indigenous students on campuses to smudge and practice their culture. Similarly, many post-secondary institutions in the province do not offer services in French and do not frequently promote Francophone culture and identity on campus. Many Francophone students face barriers to access when attempting to study in French. There is also a lack of designated Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ spaces, resources, and education in rural and northern communities resulting in students feeling isolated and alienated among their communities. Overall, there is a lack of research on cultural integration and promotion in rural and northern communities.

International students and racialized students often face higher levels of racism and discrimination within rural and northern communities and systemic issues facing rural and northern students are less likely to be understood and addressed due to a lack of research on rural and northern students and the issues they face in accessing and attending post-secondary institutions.

Rural and northern communities face unique health challenges based on their isolation and geography, such as concerns around anonymity and privacy within the community when accessing health care services due to smaller populations and greater prevalence of health risk factors, mental health issues and the rates of suicide. Despite these concerns, health care services are more difficult to access in rural and northern communities, often requiring travel to urban centres in southern regions of the province and the costs associated with travel and accommodations to access health care services for rural and northern students present as financial and emotional barriers. Health care on post-secondary campuses is not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and is currently being neglected and there are no Ontario Health Teams located in the North East or North West Local Health Integration Networks. A lack of physicians in rural and northern areas, increased hospital wait times, and lack of timely access to primary care providers hinders the quality of health care available to rural and northern students. Diverse health needs of rural and northern students, including those who are part of Indigenous, Francophone, multicultural, and Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities, are not being addressed in a culturally appropriate manner.

### ***Limited Employment Opportunities***

There are limited experiential learning opportunities in rural and northern areas compared to southern and urban areas. There are currently few jobs in rural and northern communities, leading new graduates to seek employment in larger, urban centres, as students who are not given viable employment opportunities in their home communities are more likely to travel to large, urban centres to meet this need, rather than remain in their home community. Rural and northern communities are often reliant on a single industry and lack diversified industries that are needed to strengthen the economy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these concerns, students have proposed the following recommendations for the provincial government to ensure rural and northern students are provided with equitable post-secondary experiences to students from, and studying in, southern, urban settings.

### ***Increasing Access to Post-Secondary***

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should research best practices surrounding rural and northern student orientation programming and develop guidelines as to what information institutions must share with potential students about their university, prior to enrolment. The provincial government should provide funding to the Council of Ontario Universities to include a Transition Guide for Rural and Northern Students on their online resources, specifically the Ontario Universities' Application Centre and Ontario Universities' Info. They should also provide funding to the Ontario University Registrars' Association, the Council of Ontario Universities, and the Ontario Universities' Application Centre to ensure Ontario universities' Regional Fairs reach rural and northern communities with low post-secondary attainment rates, as determined by the Council of Ontario Universities through an environmental scan, as well as travel subsidies for students in rural and northern communities to attend the Ontario Universities' Fair or Regional Fairs in the nearest region.

The provincial government should expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund within the Geographic Circumstances Grant to financially support and target early intervention programs for students in rural and northern communities; create an envelope fund for post-secondary institutions to expand their high school-specific presentations to target rural and northern students using personable outreach and creating awareness of programs and building motivation to pursue a post-secondary education prior to grade twelve; and, through the Ministry of Education, create a Rural and Northern Education Strategy aimed at addressing specific barriers rural and northern students face and promoting post-secondary education in these areas. Additionally, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should offer envelope funding to post-secondary institutions to develop a framework to build partnerships and access to early outreach with Indigenous communities in rural and northern regions.

The provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly-assisted institution. The Rural and Northern Travel Grant should be designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel, from their place of permanent residence to the nearest institution of choice. The provincial government should also introduce an Emergency Travel Grant for students originating from rural and northern communities to supplement barriers to travel in the event of an emergency.

The provincial government should provide envelope funding for northern post-secondary institutions to be used for the expansion and maintenance of campus accessibility services as well as grant funding to incentivize the expansion of resources in French and Indigenous languages for students attending northern post-secondary institutions. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide regular, targeted funding for the expansion and maintenance of the Ontario Universities' Application Centre, Ontario universities' Info, and other relevant provincial-level post-secondary resources to be made available in French, Indigenous, and other languages commonly spoken by students as well as provide funding for the expansion of Good2Talk to offer access in French and Indigenous languages.

### ***Strengthening Infrastructure***

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should conduct a study on transportation access and connectivity in rural and northern communities, with specific attention to the needs of rural and northern students as part of its comprehensive regional transportation planning. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Transportation and the Ministry of Infrastructure to develop a long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit plan to address the needs of students in rural and northern communities. The provincial government should amend Ontario Regulation 189/09: Go Transit Service Area to include rural and northern areas and facilitate coordination between Metrolinx and the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission in the

development and implementation of the long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit system in rural and northern areas.

To improve access to broadband internet for rural and northern communities, the provincial government should incentivize the private sector through tax credits to assist Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan. They should also provide a grant to northern institutions to provide students with access to up-to-date technology on campus to increase equality of access to academic resources and support and to ensure campus computers are equipped with necessary software licenses required for courses, including AutoCad, MatLab, etc. The provincial government should continue funding Contact North and eCampus Ontario to support greater online and remote access to courses for students attending northern post-secondary institutions and introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students who require access to technology off campus.

The provincial government should ensure mandatory student consultation before the approval of any satellite campus; mandate that satellite campuses in rural and northern communities comply with the Ontario differentiation policy framework, both prior to approval and throughout their operation; establish envelope funding or special purpose grants to enhance the level of support services at established satellite campuses serving substantial rural and northern student populations as well as to increase the amount of full-time staff and faculty working at satellite campuses

### ***Fostering More Supportive Campus and Community Climate***

The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to research the unique needs of rural and northern students. Additionally, the provincial government should establish an Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students that is responsible for advising and supporting the Ministry of Colleges and Universities on the unique needs of rural and northern students. The Advisory Committee should be composed of one representative from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, at least one student representative from each of the five northern universities as well as at least five students residing in a rural community; constituted biennially and consulted at least once per academic semester to inform and guide policy developments targeted at improving the post-secondary landscape for rural and northern students; and consulted during the development of any materials, programs, or services that may affect rural and northern students.

The provincial government should make funding available for the establishment of permanent, physical spaces designated for Indigenous students on campuses across the province as well as creating a Post-Secondary Indigenous Cultural Fund to support Indigenous cultural activities at northern post-secondary institutions. The provincial government should also provide grant funding to northern post-secondary institutions for student-led cultural initiatives to encourage the representation of underrepresented groups on campus; including those that promote and enhance Francophone culture and Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ arts and culture. Additionally, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should incentivize the creation and ongoing maintenance of programs offered in French at post-secondary institutions in the province. The provincial government should also provide envelope funding to northern institutions to help support the creation and implementation of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ spaces and services. Further, the provincial government should create an Ontario Culture Strategy that includes a strand targeting northern post-secondary institutions that promote Francophone and Indigenous communities and provide grant funding for those pursuing research in rural and northern communities with a focus on culture and innovation.

The provincial government should collaborate with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations to develop, make available, and implement tiered training for faculty, in consultation with Indigenous students, staff, and faculty, on Indigenous culture and supporting rural and northern students. This should be supported with grant funding for northern institutions to provide Indigenous cultural competency and anti-racism training for every employee and envelope funding for northern post-secondary institutions to provide counselling and support in response to international and domestic students facing discrimination on campus. The provincial government should also renew their Anti-Racism Strategy to address issues of racism at post-secondary institutions in rural and northern communities. As part of a renewed commitment to this strategy, they should amend the Anti-Racism

Impact Assessment to be suitable for implementation by post-secondary institutions, and require publicly-assisted, post-secondary institutions to apply the amended Anti-Racism Impact Assessment framework to all policies and programs. Additionally, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should conduct a climate survey for rural and northern students to identify key concerns and issues regarding safety and security on campus and in the community.

The Ministry of Health should expand eligibility for Northern Health Travel Grants to include students who wish to travel to receive health care in a more timely and culturally appropriate manner, in addition to targeted funding to the Ontario Health Agency for expanded access to virtual health in order to connect inbound rural and northern students with their hometown or preferred physicians, as well as specialists. They should also conduct research in order to better understand the barriers of relocation for medical professionals moving to rural and northern communities, in order to provide recommendations such as additional compensation and incentives that may be used to increase relocation of health professionals to these areas, and implement proactive measures to minimize health risk factors for students at northern post-secondary institutions by offering additional education, outreach, and incentives for students to practice healthy lifestyle habits.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Indigenous and Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students and community organizations, to provide all front-line staff health care workers in rural and northern communities with Indigenous health, and Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific, training. These ministries should also work with students and post-secondary institutions to develop health promotion activities and resources for students that increase health and wellness education, minimize unhealthy behaviours, and prevent chronic diseases.

The provincial government should allocate additional funding for training of rural and northern health care providers in the mental health and addiction field to ensure sufficient personnel and resources are available to address addiction, crisis, and mental health concerns in a more accessible and timely manner, in addition to incentives for rural and northern health care providers to apply for approval as Ontario Health Teams with a goal to provide access to supported health care transitions in rural and northern communities. Further, they should direct Health Quality Ontario to conduct research on the specific health care needs of students attending northern post-secondary institutions from a population health perspective of northern and Indigenous health.

### ***Increasing Employment Opportunities***

The provincial government should consult with the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students for feedback and input on any decision that may impact employment opportunities for students within these communities. The provincial government should introduce a stream under the Career Ready Fund to develop and expand innovative and sustainable partnerships that create experiential learning opportunities in rural and northern communities; incentivize new graduates to work in rural and northern municipalities through the use of tax credits and reduction of student loans to strengthen student-community retention and support economic growth in the community; and provide grant funding for public sector employers in rural and northern communities to create internships for students. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should establish a program, in partnership with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and/or the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario, to establish experiential learning programs, internships, and co-op opportunities, for post-secondary students.



## INTRODUCTION

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Rural and northern students face many of the same barriers to access and persistence in post-secondary education as students from southern or urban centres. However, they also face many challenges that are specific to their geographic regions, and many of the solutions that are proposed for southern and urban students will not be effective for those students living in or coming from a rural and/or northern setting. Recognizing the unique experiences of rural and northern students is an important step in improving the affordability, accessibility, accountability, and quality of post-secondary education in our province.

### *Defining Rural and Northern Students*

There are currently no legislated boundaries for rural or northern communities.<sup>1</sup> However, Statistics Canada defines rural communities as those with a population of fewer than 1,000, and a population density of less than 400 per square kilometre.<sup>2</sup> The provincial government defines northern Ontario as the City of Greater Sudbury, and the districts of Kenora, Rainy River, Thunder Bay, Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin, Sudbury, Timiskaming, Nipissing, and Parry Sound.<sup>3</sup> OUSA uses the provincial government's definition of northern Ontario, and, for the sake of clarity, considers rural areas as those 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.

There are five publicly-assisted universities in northern Ontario: Algoma University, Lakehead University, Laurentian University, Nipissing University, and Université de Hearst (a French-language undergraduate university). All other universities are located in the south, and no Ontario universities fall within the boundaries designated as rural communities. Thus, this paper only refers to northern institutions.

The recommendations in this paper address the concerns of all rural and northern students, specifically:

1. Students from rural and northern communities who attend northern post-secondary institutions;
2. Students from rural and northern communities who attend post-secondary institutions in southern, urban centres; and
3. Students from southern, urban centres who attend post-secondary institutions in northern regions.

Throughout the paper “rural and northern students” is used to refer to all three groups of students identified above, and distinctions are made where necessary. Where possible, necessary distinctions are also made between northern students and communities, and rural students and communities, although due to overlapping needs and limitations in existing research, this distinction is not always possible.

### *Indigenous and Francophone Students*

When addressing the concerns and needs of rural and northern students, it is important that attention be given to that of Indigenous and Francophone students, two cultural-linguistic minorities,<sup>4</sup> who make up a greater proportion of this student group compared to students from southern, urban regions. Northern Ontario is home to a higher percentage of both Indigenous and Francophone people relative to the

<sup>1</sup> Chris Southcott, *The Changing Population of Northern Ontario: 2001-2006* (2006 Census Research Paper Series, May 2007), online: [https://awic.ca/documents/assets/uploads/files/en/1\\_the\\_changing\\_population\\_of\\_northern\\_ontario.pdf](https://awic.ca/documents/assets/uploads/files/en/1_the_changing_population_of_northern_ontario.pdf) [*The Changing Population of Northern Ontario*].

<sup>2</sup> “Population Centre and Rural Area Classification 2016,” *Statistics Canada*, February 8, 2017, online: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/subjects/standard/pcrac/2016/introduction>.

<sup>3</sup> *The Changing Population of Northern Ontario*.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, “National Household Survey (NHS) Indigenous Population Profile, 2011 (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2013), online: [www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/index.cfm?Lang=E](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/index.cfm?Lang=E).; Ontario Office of Francophone Affairs, *Profile of Ontario's Francophone community* (Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2009).

province as a whole,<sup>5</sup> including 80 percent of all First Nations communities in Ontario.<sup>6</sup> Northern post-secondary institutions also have a higher percentage of both Indigenous and Francophone students when compared to southern, urban institutions. For example, at Laurentian University, 10 percent of the student population identifies as Indigenous.<sup>7</sup>

The term Indigenous student is used in accordance with Section 35(2) of the Canadian Constitution, which includes Indian (First Nations), Inuit and Métis peoples enrolled in undergraduate post-secondary education. As there is no “established definition” for Francophone students, we use Statistics Canada’s definition and include all students whose “mother tongue, that is, first language learned at home in childhood, and still understood” as Francophone students.<sup>9</sup> This definition of Francophone students extends to include students who have a knowledge of French as an Official Language and use it at home.

The needs and concerns of Indigenous and Francophone students are considered within the scope of this paper and the authorship team has accessed available research and commentary to capture these voices. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge that consultation and representation of both Indigenous and Francophone students was limited, and as such the concerns identified and recommendations made in this paper do not reflect the needs of these students in their entirety. Moving forward, OUSA commits to continuing to increase representation and consultation efforts to strengthen the comprehensiveness of policy recommendations.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Hogenbirk, Alain P. Gauthier & Jennifer D. Walker, “Access to Quality Medical and Health Services: Examples from Northern Ontario,” in *Rural Ontario Foresight Papers* (Rural Ontario Institute, 2019), online: <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/upload/documents/publications/reports-new/roi-paper1-health.pdf> [“Access to Quality Medical and Health Services”].

<sup>6</sup> *In the Spirit of Reconciliation: The Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation’s First 10 Years* (Government of Ontario, 2017), online: <https://www.ontario.ca/document/spirit-reconciliation-ministry-indigenous-relations-and-reconciliation-first-10-years/indigenous-peoples-ontario>.

<sup>7</sup> Rena Daviau, “Planting the seeds: Envisioning an academic pathway for Indigenous students in rural Northern Ontario,” MIR Thesis (Laurentian University, 2019), online: <https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/handle/10219/3246> [“Planting the Seeds”].

<sup>8</sup> *Constitution Act, 1982*.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Corbeil & Sylvie Lafrenière, *Portrait of Official-Language Minorities in Canada: Francophones in Ontario* (Statistics Canada, 2010), online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-642-x/2010001/article/section1-eng.htm>.

### OUTREACH

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

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

**Principle:** Early outreach is essential to increasing access to post-secondary education for rural and northern students.<sup>10</sup>

**Principle:** Relationships with Indigenous communities in rural and northern Ontario are essential to bridge educational gaps.

**Concern:** Individuals from rural and northern areas experience lower enrolment in post-secondary education compared to their counterparts in southern, urban areas.

**Concern:** Indigenous students are more likely to complete post-secondary programs below the bachelor's level.<sup>11</sup>

**Concern:** Due to the lack of early-targeting and recruitment strategies from post-secondary institutions, secondary students in rural and northern communities have fewer opportunities to learn about the advantages of, and options for, post-secondary education.

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

**Concern:** Indigenous students in rural and northern communities do not receive sufficient information about post-secondary education options early enough in their educational career.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should research best practices surrounding rural and northern student orientation programming.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide funding to the Council of Ontario Universities to include a Transition Guide for Rural and Northern Students on their online resources, specifically the Ontario Universities' Application Centre and Ontario Universities' Info.

**Recommendation:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should, based on their mandate to prioritize improving access to post-secondary education, develop guidelines as to what information institutions must share with potential students about their university, prior to enrolment.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide funding to the Ontario University Registrars' Association, the Council of Ontario Universities, and the Ontario Universities' Application Centre to ensure Ontario universities' Regional Fairs reach rural and northern communities with low post-secondary attainment rates.

<sup>10</sup> "Planting the Seeds".

<sup>11</sup> Karen Kelly-Scott, *Aboriginal peoples: Fact Sheet for Ontario* (Statistics Canada, March 14, 2016), online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-656-x/89-656-x2016007-eng.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> "Planting the Seeds".

**Recommendation:** The Council of Ontario Universities should conduct an environmental scan to identify regions with low post-secondary attainment rates and hold Regional Fairs for these students.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide travel subsidies for students in rural and northern communities to attend the Ontario Universities' Fair or Regional Fairs in the nearest region.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund within the Geographic Circumstances Grant to financially support and target early intervention programs for students in rural and northern communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should create an envelope fund for post-secondary institutions to expand their high school-specific presentations to target rural and northern students using personable outreach and creating awareness of programs and building motivation to pursue a post-secondary education prior to grade twelve.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Education should create a Rural and Northern Education Strategy aimed at addressing specific barriers rural and northern students face and promoting post-secondary education in these areas.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should offer envelope funding to post-secondary institutions to develop a framework to build partnerships and access to early outreach with Indigenous communities in rural and northern regions.

All willing and qualified students should be able to access and excel within Ontario's post-secondary education (PSE) system, yet students from rural and northern communities face unique barriers that limit their access to a university education and, as a result, are underrepresented on university campuses. According to Statistics Canada's 2010 Youth in Transition Survey, "young people from urban areas are much more likely to attend university than those from rural areas."<sup>13</sup> For example, "about 47 per cent of youth from southern urban areas had attended university with just 40 per cent of youth from northern urban areas and 30 per cent from northern rural regions."<sup>14</sup> This gap in post-secondary participation for students from rural and northern communities has been attributed to the "rural effect", a culmination of related factors, including: parental education, family income, high school experiences, higher costs associated with greater distances from universities, different preference for higher education, and other cultural factors.<sup>15</sup> This can, in part, be attributed to low exposure to the value of a university education in addition to a lack of targeted outreach programming in rural and northern communities. Increasing the proportion of rural and northern students at Ontario's universities requires dissemination of comprehensive information about post-secondary opportunities in the province.

According to researchers studying the participation rates of students from rural and northern communities in Canada, "parents who have pursued post-secondary education are more likely to encourage their children to follow in their footsteps."<sup>16</sup> It is also known that generational and parental education are factors in decisions to pursue a post-secondary education.<sup>17</sup> However, for northern communities in particular, there is often a lower percentage of the population who have a post-secondary

<sup>13</sup> Ross Finnie, Andrew Wismer & Richard E. Mueller, "Access and Barriers to Postsecondary Education: Evidence from the Youth in Transition Survey," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 45, no. 2 (2015): 229-262.

<sup>14</sup> Claude Sharma, "Why so many students in the north aren't going to college or university," TVO, September 14, 2018, online: <https://www.tvo.org/article/why-so-many-students-in-the-north-arent-going-to-college-or-university> [Sharma, "Students in the north"].

<sup>15</sup> Kathryn McMullen, "post-secondary Education Participation among Underrepresented and minority Groups," *Statistics Canada, Centre for Education Statistics*, December 16, 2011, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-004-x/2011004/article/11595-eng.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Sharma, "Students in the north", referencing David Zarifa, Darcy Hango, Roger Pizarro Milian, "Proximity, Prosperity, and Participation: Examining Access to post-secondary Education among Youth in Canada's Provincial North," (2017) *Rural Sociology* 83, 2: 270-314.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Turcotte, "Intergenerational education mobility: University completion in relation to parents' education level," *Statistics Canada*, 11-008-X, November 27, 2015, online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-008-x/2011002/article/11536-eng.htm>.

education compared to southern, urban centres and the provincial average.<sup>18</sup> According to the 2016 Census, in Greater Sudbury and Thunder Bay, 20.3 percent and 23.7 percent of people between 25 and 64 had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 40.9 percent and 28.4 percent of people in Toronto and Hamilton, respectively.<sup>19</sup> In particular, access to, and participation in, PSE is limited for rural and northern Indigenous students, students who come from low-income families, and students whose parents do not have any PSE. Currently, there is little focus on finding solutions, strategies, and models to adapt early outreach and recruitment strategies to a rural and northern context.<sup>20</sup>

This is compounded by the fact that youth in rural and northern communities are not targeted with comparable outreach resources to their peers in southern, urban centres. Early outreach is essential to increasing access to post-secondary education for rural and northern students,<sup>21</sup> who should have access to comparable outreach resources to their peers, as well as resources that are tailored to their unique needs. The Ontario Universities' Fair (OUF) - the largest educational fair in the country - "gives [students] an opportunity to talk to representatives from each Ontario university about programs, campus life and anything else that may help [them] make a decision about which Ontario university to choose."<sup>22</sup> However, this event, and other similar large-scale outreach events, are typically held in southern, urban areas with high populations and can be difficult to access for students from rural and northern communities. Even Ontario Universities' Regional Fairs that travel across the province may not be accessible to students in rural and northern communities with limited transportation options. One way the provincial government can support access to these events is by providing travel subsidies for rural and northern students to attend the Ontario Universities' Fair or Regional Fairs. In addition to providing students with travel subsidies to attend these outreach events, the Council of Ontario Universities should conduct an environmental scan to identify regions with low post-secondary attainment rates and ensure that Regional Fairs are held in these areas. The provincial government can support the expansion of these outreach events by providing funding to the Ontario University Registrars' Association (OURA), Council of Ontario Universities, and the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) to bring Regional Fairs to rural and northern communities identified as having low post-secondary attainment rates.

To address the barriers that limit outreach initiatives targeting rural and northern students, the provincial government should take steps to better inform students of post-secondary options available to them. 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 knowledge or opportunity to physically attend an outreach event. A Transition Resource Guide for Rural and Northern Students should be created and accessible through online platforms such as OUAC and Ontario Universities' Info. The Transition Guide would help arm students with the knowledge they need to access resources such as counseling, financial assistance, health and wellness, educational supports, and much more, in order to help them make a successful transition to post-secondary.

The provincial government should also invest in early intervention programs for students from rural and northern communities. Early intervention programs are premised on the belief that access to post-secondary education requires comprehensive supports - "including mentoring, tutoring, counselling, academic enrichment, parental involvement and scholarships" - that are introduced early in a student's educational career.<sup>23</sup> The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario has identified early intervention programs as "an increasingly important part of the PSE landscape."<sup>24</sup> The provincial government can

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Education, "Backgrounder: 2015 Graduation Rate Across the Province," (May 3, 2016), <https://news.ontario.ca/edu/en/2016/05/2015-graduation-rates-across-the-province.html>.

<sup>19</sup> "Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census," *Statistics Canada*, Data products, July 18, 2019, online: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-CMA-Eng.cfm?TOPIC=10&LANG=Eng&GK=CMA&GC=580>.

<sup>20</sup> "Planting the Seeds".

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "About," *Ontario Universities' Fair*, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.ontariouniversitiesfair.ca/about/>.

<sup>23</sup> Fiona Deller & Rosanna Tamburri, *Early Supports for Accessing Postsecondary Education: Good, Bad or Indifferent?* (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2019), online: <http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/Formatted-Access%20Early%20Interventions.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

invest in early intervention programs by expanding the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund within the Geographic Circumstances Grant. This fund “provides funding for school boards to further improve education for students in rural and Northern communities through support for additional operating expenses, enhanced student transportation options and improved programming or staff supports.”<sup>25</sup> Expanded funding would allow rural and northern schools to enhance their early intervention programming with the goal of increasing post-secondary attainment rates among rural and northern students.

In addition to expanding the Rural and Northern Students Education Fund, the provincial government should provide institutions with envelope funding to support university recruitment targeting rural and northern students through personable outreach, creating an awareness of programs and building motivation to pursue PSE prior to grade twelve. This funding should be provided alongside guidance on best practices for outreach and transition programming targeting rural and northern students so that institutional outreach efforts are effective for these students. Currently, however, there is a gap in consolidated knowledge to provide such guidance. Therefore, OUSA recommends that the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) research best practices surrounding rural and northern student orientation. Sharing best practices will ensure students across Ontario’s post-secondary institutions are receiving adequate information prior to attending university. HEQCO should use this research to develop guidelines as to what vital information institutions must share with potential students about their university, prior to enrolment. Developing such guidelines will ensure all post-secondary institutions are held to the same standards in regard to the sharing of vital information. These guidelines may include information on academic programs, campus infrastructure, and academic and peer-to-peer support programs available to students upon arrival.

Consideration of the unique needs of rural and northern Indigenous students must also be taken when addressing development of, access to, and outreach for PSE. Indigenous students in rural and northern communities face a number of barriers to accessing PSE,<sup>26</sup> and many do not receive sufficient information about PSE options early enough in their educational career,<sup>27</sup> contributing to the underrepresentation of Indigenous students at post-secondary institutions across the province. The result is that Indigenous students are less likely to complete PSE above the bachelor’s level, creating educational attainment gaps in post-secondary education.<sup>28</sup> It is important to address these gaps as there are many advantages to attaining a university degree, including “a lasting positive impact...in areas of higher education, self-government, self-determination, health, and economic benefits of employment and other measures that improve standards of living.”<sup>29</sup> Ensuring that Indigenous students are targeted in early outreach initiatives for rural and northern students is one important way to open pathways to PSE for these students.<sup>30</sup>

Early outreach and dissemination is vital to help students envision educational possibilities and pathways. Providing in-depth information regarding PSE at an early age allows students to be more prepared in terms of academics and finances. Envelope funding and incentives are needed to financially support and target the expansion of early recruitment and intervention programs for Indigenous students in rural and northern communities. Allocated funds would help support and integrate institutional plans geared to lessen access barriers from an early age. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should therefore offer envelope funding to post-secondary institutions to develop a framework to build partnerships and access to early outreach with Indigenous communities in rural and northern regions.

<sup>25</sup> 2019-2020 Education Funding: A Guide to the Grants for Student Needs (Government of Ontario, 2019), online: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1920/GSNGuide2019-20.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> To read OUSA’s recommendations to the provincial government addressing these barriers, see Bathish, Nadia, Ryan Deshpande, Piers Kreps, Hannah Martin, Samantha Powless, and Urszula Sitarz, *Policy Paper: Indigenous Students* (Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> “Planting the Seeds”.

<sup>28</sup> Clare Bekenn, “Indigenous Access to Post-Secondary Education: How Federal Policy Can Help Close the Gap,” Major Research Paper (University of Ottawa, July 2016).

<sup>29</sup> “Planting the Seeds”.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Relationships between post-secondary institutions and Indigenous communities in rural and northern Ontario are essential to bridge educational gaps. Early outreach and secure relationships with Indigenous communities based on understanding and awareness are key in creating a collaborative knowledge system that does not perpetuate on colonial notions of domination, but instead is rooted in egalitarianism and mutual respect.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly important in the spirit of reconciliation that seeks to reject “the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system”<sup>32</sup> – an imperative for all systems in Canadian society, including higher education. Post-secondary institutions should therefore prioritize relationship building with Indigenous communities in rural and northern regions to increase accessibility and availability of post-secondary education for rural and northern Indigenous students.

## TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

**Principle:** Post-secondary students from rural and northern communities should be able to access sufficient transportation options to and from their place of permanent residence.

**Concern:** The elimination of the Ontario Distance Grant - Travel has resulted in financial barriers to post-secondary education for students from rural and northern areas.

**Concern:** The model used for calculating Ontario Student Grants does not explicitly or transparently factor in distance-related travel costs for rural and northern areas.

**Concern:** Currently, students needing to travel long distances to return to their place of permanent residence from their institution in the event of an emergency are not able to access financial support to supplement the cost of travel.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly-assisted institution.

**Recommendation:** The Rural and Northern Travel Grant should be designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel, from their place of permanent residence to the nearest institution of choice.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should introduce an Emergency Travel Grant for students originating from rural and northern communities to supplement barriers to travel in the event of an emergency.

Students from rural and northern communities face barriers to accessing post-secondary education as a result of increased distance-related costs and less developed transportation infrastructure. As a result, students from rural and northern communities are at a greater risk of transportation disadvantage compared to students from southern, urban areas when travelling to and from their place of permanent residence.<sup>33</sup> Further compounding the issue is the growing cost of relocating for post-secondary. 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 7.2% since 2014.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore crucial that rural and northern students - who may have to relocate to attend any post-secondary institution, let alone their institution of choice - have access to financial assistance to do so.

<sup>31</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Ottawa, ON: 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Marr, “Assessing Transportation Disadvantage in Rural Ontario, Canada: A Case Study of Huron County” (MSc. thesis, University of Guelph, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Updated statistics for rising cost of shelter in the province: Statistics Canada, “Consumer Price Index, by province (Ontario)” accessed December 18, 2019, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/101/cst01/econ09g-eng.htm>.

Prior to 2017, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) offered a special purpose grant for students from remote and rural areas in the province. At the time, this grant (Ontario Distance Grant - Travel) awarded OSAP-eligible students living more than 80km from the nearest publicly-assisted institution a maximum of \$300 per academic year.<sup>35</sup> In 2017 the structure of OSAP changed and special purpose grants, including the Ontario Distance Grant, were eliminated in favour of a single, up-front grant.<sup>36</sup> Under this new model, “distance related costs [would] continue to be recognized as part of the new grant calculation”,<sup>37</sup> however there was no transparency regarding how distance-related costs were calculated and what effect this would have on the awards students received. In 2019 OSAP was changed again, and it became even more unclear how (or if) distance-related costs were factored into Ontario Student Grants (OSG) - the provincial portion of OSAP grants - which, overall, fewer students are now eligible for.<sup>38</sup>

While the pre-2017 Ontario Distance Grant had limitations in its eligibility requirements that could be improved to allow greater access to post-secondary for rural and northern students, the subsequent changes have not proven to address these limitations and have added issues around transparency. OUSA therefore recommends that the provincial government reintroduce the Ontario Distance Grant, reimagined as a Rural and Northern Travel Grant. The new Rural and Northern Travel Grant would be modeled on the Ontario Distance Grant, with improvements to expand eligibility requirements and award amounts. Specifically, rural and northern OSAP-eligible students living 40km - decreased from 80km - from the nearest publicly-assisted institution would be eligible to receive funding. This expansion of eligibility is important to ensure that students who face a transportation disadvantage and must travel to attend post-secondary are able to do so without added financial barriers. Additionally, rather than offering funding on a per-kilometer basis, funding amounts would be determined commensurate with the cost of travel. This is necessary to account for the fact that the cost of travel is not only determined by distance travelled, and instead includes the type and availability of transit options. It is crucial that students in rural and northern communities be able to exercise choice equal to students from southern, urban centres and therefore this Grant should not require students to attend the nearest, program-offering institution, but rather be open for students to receive funding support to attend the institution of their choice.

Additionally, award amounts should account for the costs of relocating that rural and northern students incur, and therefore the \$300 per academic term cap should be removed. This would help to provide rural and northern students with the financial assistance they may require to relocate for post-secondary, including for those students who require financial assistance for a personal vehicle as transportation infrastructure in rural and northern communities has not developed to the point that all students have access to public transportation.

In the event of an emergency, students may be required to travel long distances from their post-secondary institution in order to return home. Travelling in response to an emergency can be costly and create financial barriers for students who may already be facing difficult situations, regardless of their geographic location. However, for students returning to rural and northern communities, travel in an emergency is even more difficult and costly due to limited transportation options. These students face greater barriers to returning home in the event of an emergency, and one area where the provincial government can provide support is in relieving some of the additional financial burdens that arise in an emergency. The provincial government should therefore introduce an Emergency Travel Grant for students originating from rural and northern communities to supplement barriers to travel in the event of an emergency.

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, “Ontario Distance Grant – Travel”, accessed November 4, 2016, <https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/A-ZListofAid/PRDRo15o86.html>.

<sup>36</sup> “FAQs About the New Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) 2018-2019”, Government of Ontario, 2017, online: [https://www.uottawa.ca/financial-aid-awards/sites/www.uottawa.ca.financial-aid-awards/files/osap\\_fa\\_q\\_en\\_2018.pdf](https://www.uottawa.ca/financial-aid-awards/sites/www.uottawa.ca.financial-aid-awards/files/osap_fa_q_en_2018.pdf) [“FAQs about the new OSAP”].

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan Tishcoff, “What’s the Deal with the 2019 Changes to OSAP?”, *OUSA*, September 17, 2019, online: [https://www.ousa.ca/blog\\_osap\\_changes](https://www.ousa.ca/blog_osap_changes).



## ACCESSIBILITY

**Principle:** Rural and northern students should have the same ease of access to, and quality of, support as students living in southern, urban areas.

**Principle:** Students should have access to materials and resources in their preferred language.

**Concern:** Many post-secondary institutions in Ontario do not provide support in French and Indigenous languages.

**Concern:** Northern post-secondary institutions face unique budgetary challenges compared to those in southern, urban areas which can result in varying quality and quantity of accessibility services.

**Concern:** Northern post-secondary institutions often do not have the financial resources needed to modify existing infrastructure to adhere to basic accessibility guidelines.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide envelope funding for northern post-secondary institutions to be used for the expansion and maintenance of campus accessibility services.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to incentivize the expansion of resources in French and Indigenous languages for students attending northern post-secondary institutions.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide regular, targeted funding for the expansion and maintenance of the Ontario Universities' Application Centre, Ontario universities' Info, and other relevant provincial-level post-secondary resources to be made available in French, Indigenous, and other languages commonly spoken by students.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide funding for the expansion of Good2Talk to offer access in French and Indigenous languages.

All students should have the same ease of access to, and quality of, supports, yet access to necessary supports and services in rural and northern communities can vary in quality and quantity when compared to southern, urban communities.<sup>39</sup> This is particularly true for those with accessibility needs and those who face language barriers when services are only available in English.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission found that many individuals with disabilities from northern communities may have to leave their community support systems in order to access specialized educational programs in southern Ontario.<sup>40</sup> This can lead to significant barriers to access for rural and northern students. This problem is exacerbated in some parts of northern Ontario. One example is northern students who are hard of hearing. The Canadian Hearing Society states that, "students in Northern Ontario have difficulty accessing interpreters, and may find themselves forced to move to Southern Ontario because that is where services are available."<sup>41</sup> One way to address this barrier is to provide support to northern post-secondary institutions for the expansion and maintenance of campus accessibility services. Northern institutions need support in this area because they face unique budgetary challenges compared to those in southern, urban areas. Low enrolment at northern post-secondary institutions over the past five years<sup>42</sup> and the ten percent tuition reduction and freeze announced in 2019,

<sup>39</sup> "The Opportunity to Succeed: Achieving Barrier-Free Education for Students with Disabilities." Ontario Human Rights Commission. Accessed February 19, 2020, online: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/opportunity-succeed-achieving-barrier-free-education-students-disabilities>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Simona Chiose, "Ontario Universities Facing Supply-Demand Imbalance," *The Globe and Mail*, May 18, 2017, online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/ontario-universities-facing-supply-demand-imbalance/article35035765/>.

left many northern institutions facing significant budget cuts. This has resulted in limited spending to support students in important areas. Currently, provincial spending accounts for less than 50 percent of university funding, and the remainder comes from tuition and ancillary fees. However, despite the provincial government’s promise to “administer a fund to help smaller, northern institutions adjust to the tuition rate reduction”,<sup>43</sup> northern institutions have not received this necessary financial support to ensure their campuses are meeting the needs of students.

Another barrier to access for students attending post-secondary institutions in rural and northern communities is the lack of resources available in their preferred language. The highest percentage of Francophone and Indigenous people live in northern Ontario compared to the province as a whole.<sup>44</sup> However, many northern institutions do not have the resources needed to provide necessary services to students in French or Indigenous languages. By providing grant funding for northern institutions to allow for the creation and distribution of resources in French and Indigenous languages, the provincial government can help reduce barriers to access for Francophone and Indigenous students.

This is a concern across the province as well, as many Ontario universities do not provide resources and support in French and Indigenous languages. While a large number of Indigenous and Francophone students attend post-secondary institutions in northern communities, others may choose to attend a post-secondary institution located in southern Ontario. Language gaps can lead to additional barriers for Indigenous and Francophone students, especially those originating from traditionally French-speaking communities in northern Ontario. In order to address this concern, the provincial government should provide targeted funding for the expansion of the Ontario Universities’ Application Centre (OUAC), Ontario universities’ Info, and other relevant provincial post-secondary resources to be made available in the most commonly spoken languages. This expansion would help to eliminate access barriers for students created by the inability to access necessary resources in their language of preference.

Ensuring students have access to mental health supports in their preferred language is especially important. Remote 24-hour support services, such as Good2Talk, should be the primary focus of these efforts, since many institutions often do not offer 24-hour support for students and community resources can often be limited or difficult to physically access for students at northern institutions. In order to ensure accessible support for rural and northern students, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide funding for the expansion of Good2Talk to be accessible in French and Indigenous languages. This would provide students living in rural and northern areas the ability to access the support they need with greater ease.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

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### INTER-REGIONAL TRANSIT

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

**Concern:** Not all rural and northern students have access to inter-regional transportation services to attend their post-secondary institutions or co-op/placement positions.

**Concern:** The cost of daily commuting for rural and northern students to and from campus poses a significant financial burden.

<sup>43</sup> “Government for the People to Lower Student Tuition Burden by 10 per cent,” *Government of Ontario Newsroom*, January 17, 2019, online: <https://news.ontario.ca/maesd/en/2019/01/government-for-the-people-to-lower-student-tuition-burden-by-10-per-cent.html>.

<sup>44</sup> “Access to Quality Medical and Health Services”.

**Recommendation:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should conduct a study on transportation access and connectivity in rural and northern communities, with specific attention to the needs of rural and northern students as part of its comprehensive regional transportation planning.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Transportation and the Ministry of Infrastructure to develop a long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit plan to address the needs of students in rural and northern communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should amend Ontario Regulation 189/09: Go Transit Service Area to include rural and northern areas.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should facilitate coordination between Metrolinx and the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission in the development and implementation of the long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit system in rural and northern areas.

Geographic location should not be a barrier to accessing post-secondary education. Yet, rural and northern students face barriers to accessing and commuting to their post-secondary institutions as a result of underdeveloped, unreliable, and underfunded inter-regional transit systems in rural and northern areas.<sup>45</sup> Infrastructure gaps have left many rural and northern students without access to inter-regional transportation services that many rely on to attend classes, engage in extracurriculars and campus programming, access services on campus and in the community, and participate in co-op and placement opportunities.<sup>46</sup> This is particularly concerning for students with low incomes and those who are unable to afford personal vehicles.<sup>47</sup>

Since the mid-2010s, inter-regional transit options have decreased in rural and northern areas - Greyhound cancelled a number of routes, including all service west of Sudbury,<sup>48</sup> and Ontario Northland's bus service has reduced frequency.<sup>49</sup> It is clear that there are barriers to accessing inter-regional transit in rural and northern areas, and that existing infrastructure does not facilitate the connectivity that is crucial to ensuring all students can access post-secondary education. To address this issue, the provincial government must take steps to develop a long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit plan targeting rural and northern areas through collaboration between the ministries of Transportation and Infrastructure. These ministries should work with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to ensure that this plan accounts for the needs of students in these regions. The provincial government has already taken steps towards its commitment to "develop regional transportation plans that will connect people and places across the province" with its first regional transportation plan for southwestern Ontario, *Connecting the Southwest*, released in January 2020.<sup>50</sup> As part of its

<sup>45</sup> *Accelerating Rural Transportation Solutions: Ten Community Case Studies from Ontario* (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, October 2014), online: [http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/ARTS\\_-\\_Case\\_Studies\\_for\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/ARTS_-_Case_Studies_for_WEB.pdf) [*Accelerating Rural Transportation Solutions*].

<sup>46</sup> Sean Marshall, "How intercity bus service is failing Ontarians," *TVO*, November 28, 2017, online: <https://www.tvo.org/article/how-intercity-bus-service-is-failing-ontarians>; "Rural and Northern Community Issues in Mental Health," *Canadian Mental Health Association*, September 2009, online: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/rural-and-northern-community-issues-in-mental-health/>; "Public Transportation Not Just an Urban Concern," *Northern Policy Institute*, January 20, 2015, online: <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/article/public-transportation-not-just-an-urban-concern-293.asp>; IBI Group, Hemson Consulting, *Intercommunity Passenger Transportation* (Draft Technical Backgrounder, Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy, prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, November 2016), online: [https://northernontariommts.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/ttr\\_passengertransport-backgrounder-2016-11-04.pdf](https://northernontariommts.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/ttr_passengertransport-backgrounder-2016-11-04.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> *Accelerating Rural Transportation Solutions*.

<sup>48</sup> Sean Marshall, "Planes, trains, and automobiles (sort of): Getting to and around northern Ontario without a car," *TVO*, September 10, 2019, online: <https://www.tvo.org/article/planes-trains-and-automobiles-sort-of-getting-to-and-around-northern-ontario-without-a-car>.

<sup>49</sup> "Greyhound finally calls it quits in most of Northern Ontario," *Northern Ontario Business*, July 9, 2018, online: <https://www.northernontariobusiness.com/industry-news/transportation/greyhound-finally-calls-it-quits-in-most-of-northern-ontario-979664>.

<sup>50</sup> "Ontario Releases First Regional Transportation Plan," *Government of Ontario Newsroom*, January 17, 2020, online: <https://news.ontario.ca/mto/en/2020/01/ontario-releases-first-regional-transportation-plan.html>.

“comprehensive regional transportation planning for the province,” the province has also stated that “[r]egional planning is also underway for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Northern and Eastern Ontario.”<sup>51</sup>

To assist in this planning, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) should conduct a study on transportation access and connectivity in rural and northern communities, with specific attention to the needs of rural and northern students. This will require consultation with rural and northern students and institutions, in addition to stakeholder groups engaged for the *Connecting the Southwest* plan (i.e., municipal leaders, Indigenous communities, community leaders, businesses, and transportation experts). In conducting said survey, HEQCO should also collaborate with provincial bodies that will be able to further inform on rural transit issues, such as the Rural Ontario Institute, the Ontario Traffic Council, and the Transportation Association of Canada.<sup>52</sup> Using the information gathered from this study, the ministries of Transportation and Infrastructure will be able to develop a long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit plan for rural and northern areas that pays particular attention to the needs of rural and northern students.

There is also an opportunity for the provincial government to expand existing resources that have demonstrated effectiveness in other areas of the province in order to address gaps in service that create access barriers for students in rural and northern communities. Specifically, the provincial government should expand the mandate and geographical scope of Metrolinx and facilitate coordination between Metrolinx and the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission to support implementation of the inter-regional transit plan in rural and northern areas.

Metrolinx is mandated “to provide leadership in the co-ordination [*sic*], planning, financing, development and implementation of an integrated, multi-modal transportation network”.<sup>53</sup> Currently, the *Metrolinx Act* and associated regulation, Ontario Regulation 189/09, limit the agency’s regional scope to a defined list of municipalities and regions in southwestern Ontario, as well as “any additional prescribed areas”.<sup>54</sup> Amending Ontario Regulation 189/09 to include rural and northern regions would allow Metrolinx to apply their mandate to rural and northern regions, which would help to enhance access to post-secondary for students living and studying in these areas. An amendment to this effect would not contradict Metrolinx’s current mandate, which allows for “additional prescribed areas”, or its current geographical scope which includes routes beyond the GTHA, such as Barrie and Kitchener. Importantly, expansion of Metrolinx to provide service to rural and northern regions should account for regional differences and adjust service provision and passenger costs to be appropriate for the areas.

In addition to expanding the scope of Metrolinx, the provincial government should also facilitate coordination between Metrolinx and the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission in order to more effectively implement an inter-regional transit system in rural and northern regions. Metrolinx and the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission have already taken steps to partner on specific projects,<sup>55</sup> and the provincial government could capitalize on this connection by facilitating a continued partnership for a more comprehensive inter-regional transit plan. These two partners are ideal candidates “based on Ontario Northland’s experience in rural rail and Metrolinx’s expertise in planning multi-billion-dollar

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “About,” *Rural Ontario Institute*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/about/>; “About us,” *Ontario Traffic Council*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://otc.org/about-us/>; “About TAC,” *Transportation Association of Canada*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.tac-atc.ca/en/about-tac>.

<sup>53</sup> “Discussion Paper for the Next Regional Transportation Plan,” Metrolinx, (August 2016), [http://www.metrolinx.com/en/regionalplanning/rtp/RTP\\_Discussion\\_Paper\\_EN.pdf](http://www.metrolinx.com/en/regionalplanning/rtp/RTP_Discussion_Paper_EN.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> *Metrolinx Act*, 2006, S.O. 2006, c. 16; O. Reg. 189/09; GO TRANSIT SERVICE AREA.

<sup>55</sup> “Extensive Media Coverage on Return of Passenger Rail to Northern Ontario,” *Transport Action Ontario*, November 22, 2020, online: <http://ontario.transportaction.ca/extensive-media-coverage-on-return-of-passenger-rail-to-northern-ontario/>; Ian Ross, “Ontario Northland union boss favours Metrolinx alliance,” *Northern Ontario Business*, June 7, 2019, online: <https://www.northernontariobusiness.com/industry-news/transportation/ontario-northern-union-boss-favours-metrolinx-alliance-1493918> [Ross, “ON union boss favours Metrolinx alliance”]; Ian Ross, “Ontario Northland not on board with passenger rail, consultant reports,” *Sudbury.com*, June 5, 2019, online: <https://www.sudbury.com/around-the-north/ontario-northern-union-boss-favours-metrolinx-alliance-1493918>.

urban transit projects.”<sup>56</sup> This would require inter-ministerial coordination between the Ministry of Transportation, responsible for overseeing Metrolinx, and the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development, and Mines, responsible for overseeing Ontario Northland.<sup>57</sup> It would also benefit from collaboration with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to ensure post-secondary institutions and students are considered in development and implementation of the plan.

## INTERNET/TECHNOLOGY

**Principle:** Students at northern institutions require the same level of access to high-speed, broadband internet to complete their post-secondary education as students in southern, urban regions.

**Principle:** Students at northern institutions should have the same level of access to the modern equipment and tools necessary to prepare for the continuously innovating workforce as students in southern, urban regions.

**Principle:** Students at northern institutions should have access to online classes with diverse and extensive options to fill gaps in course offerings.

**Principle:** Students at northern institutions should be able to access lectures for courses they are enrolled in remotely to improve accessibility and attendance.

**Principle:** Students should have greater access to technology and online resources due to its correlation and effect on academic outcome.

**Concern:** Private sector internet providers are not effectively incentivized to support access to, and the development of, quality internet service in rural and northern areas.

**Concern:** Mandatory software that some post-secondary courses require are not freely available at northern post-secondary institutions.

**Concern:** Students at northern institutions face additional barriers to physically accessing campus, such as inclement weather and lack of public transportation.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should incentivize the private sector through tax credits to assist Ontario’s Broadband and Cellular Action Plan and improve access to broadband internet for rural and northern communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide a grant to northern institutions to provide students with access to up-to-date technology on campus to increase equality of access to academic resources and support.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide northern post-secondary institutions with purchasing grants to ensure campus computers are equipped with necessary software licenses required for courses, including AutoCad, MatLab, etc.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should continue funding Contact North and eCampus Ontario to support greater online and remote access to courses for students attending northern post-secondary institutions.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students who require access to technology off campus.

<sup>56</sup> Ross, “ON union boss favours Metrolinx alliance”.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Rural and northern students require the same level of access to technology and internet services as southern, urban students. Access to, and knowledge of, internet and modern, up-to-date technology is a near universal necessity in our province for education, employment, and social connectivity.<sup>58</sup> Students are now required to take online courses as part of the K-12 curriculums;<sup>59</sup> and an increasing number of post-secondary courses and programs are now online. Even courses and programs that are not online require access to the internet to complete and submit assignments and access course materials.<sup>60</sup> However, many rural and northern communities are underserved in the area of internet infrastructure. In July 2019, the provincial government introduced *Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan*, stating: "It is unacceptable to this government that not everyone in Ontario has access to the broadband or cellular connections they need. In fact, as much as 12% of our population lives in communities – mostly rural, remote or northern areas – that are unserved or underserved. We need to do better."<sup>61</sup> In 2016, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) "declared that broadband Internet amounted to an essential service", yet "18% of Canadians – most of whom live in rural and remote areas – do not have access to" what the CRTC has deemed universal target speeds of 50/10 Mbps."<sup>62</sup> It is essential that as we move forward in an increasingly digital world that rural and northern student are not left behind.

The provincial government's commitment and action plan to improve access to high-speed internet and cellular services across the province is an important step towards greater access for rural and northern students. "Market failure is a consistent feature in communications in rural Canada, promoting government to play an active role to entice development."<sup>63</sup> The limited number of corporations offering these services have not been incentivised to expand services in rural and northern communities. Offering tax incentives to businesses that enhance wi-fi connection and download speeds in these areas will enhance connectivity for students as they adapt to increasingly online and technology-facilitated classrooms. This initiative would also support Ontario's *Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan*, whose goal is to increase connectivity province-wide.<sup>64</sup>

Alongside regional broadband infrastructure improvements, there is also a need to support post-secondary institutions to provide their students with access to the technology they need to succeed. One example of how post-secondary institutions are supporting rural and northern students access these necessary services is the University College of the North (UCN). UCN, which is funded by the Manitoba government, has been a model for delivering education to rural and northern areas by offering services by adopting technologies. With most residents having access to slow internet speeds (up to 2 Mbps) or none at all, campuses like UCN and their regional centres are hubs for academic services and support to receive post-secondary education for students without access in these areas.<sup>65</sup> In Ontario, rural and northern students would benefit from a similar model. Like the Manitoba government, which funds programs like that at the UCN, the Ontario government should provide support for northern post-secondary institutions to be able to offer their students the same level of access to up-to-date technology as post-secondary institutions in southern, urban regions. To do this, the provincial government should provide a grant to northern post-secondary institutions to provide students with access to up-to-date technology on campus

<sup>58</sup> Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan," *Government of Ontario*, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/speed-ontarios-broadband-and-cellular-action-plan> ["Up to Speed"].

<sup>59</sup> "Ontario Brings Learning into the Digital Age," *Ontario Newsroom*, November 21, 2019, online: <https://news.ontario.ca/edu/en/2019/11/ontario-brings-learning-into-the-digital-age.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Emerald Bensadoun, "Network outage affecting colleges, universities could spell trouble for students trying to submit assignments online," *Toronto Star*, April 10, 2019, online: <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2019/04/10/network-outage-affecting-colleges-universities-could-spell-trouble-for-students-trying-to-submit-assignments-online.html>.

<sup>61</sup> "Up to Speed".

<sup>62</sup> Dan Ruimy, *Broadband Connectivity in Rural Canada: Overcoming the Digital Divide* (Report of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, April 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Gregory Taylor, "Remote Rural Broadband Systems in Canada," *Telecommunications Policy*, (2017) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2018.02.001>.

<sup>64</sup> "Up to Speed".

<sup>65</sup> "Reaching Remote Students with Appropriate Technology and Course Design at the University College of the North, Manitoba, Canada," *Contact North: Online Learning*, February 26, 2019, <https://teachonline.ca/pockets-innovation/reaching-remote-students-appropriate-technology-and-course-design-university-college-north-manitoba>.

to increase equality of access to academic resources and support. This should be supplemented by purchasing grants to ensure campus computers are equipped with necessary software licenses required for courses, including AutoCad and MatLab, and other commonly used programs in post-secondary courses.

However, rural and northern students also face barriers to physically accessing campus, such as inclement weather and lack of public transportation.<sup>66</sup> This means that while ensuring students on campus have access to the technology they need to engage in their courses, it is also important that rural and northern students be able to access these services off-campus as well. To support this, the provincial government should introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students who require access to technology off campus. This would help to ensure students who have financial barriers to accessing technology are not disadvantaged when compared to their peers with the financial ability to access services and those in southern, urban centres who are more easily able to access services provided on campus.

The difficulties rural and northern students face accessing post-secondary institutions can be mitigated, in part, through online course which allow students to access post-secondary without having to leave their home communities. Access to diverse and extensive course offerings online, and the ability to attend lectures remotely, are important for all students, but particularly for rural and northern students who may only be able to access post-secondary remotely yet do not have the infrastructure in place to support remote attendance. This was made evidently clear at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic's reach into rural and northern Ontario in early 2020. Post-secondary institutions found difficulty in transitioning to a virtual classroom using more online tools and formats, which disadvantaged the students as well as educators scrambling to adapt to the new format quickly. This was exacerbated by the poor broadband access in these regions, disadvantaging rural and northern students during an already challenging time. The measures implemented in response to COVID-19 have highlighted the need to set a culture of normalcy in seeing online resources as a benefit rather than a burden in the classroom.<sup>67</sup> Since 1986, the provincial government has funded efforts to support online learning in rural and northern regions through Contact North, which receives \$10.5 million in continuous annual funding from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities.<sup>68</sup> More recently, the provincial government began funding eCampusOntario "to be a centre of excellence in online and technology-enabled learning for all publicly funded colleges and universities in Ontario."<sup>69</sup> Both Contact North and eCampusOntario have been important drivers in increasing access to post-secondary education through online and technology-enabled learning, particularly for rural and northern students. As we move forward and rely increasingly on online learning, it is essential that the provincial government continue to support those breaking down the barriers that put rural and northern students at an unfair disadvantage.

## SATELLITE CAMPUSES

**Principle:** Satellite campuses can make post-secondary institutions more geographically accessible to students in rural and northern communities by extending an institution's reach.

**Principle:** Satellite campuses boost local economies by bringing in large populations of students.

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

<sup>66</sup> See, *Inter-regional Transit*, above.

<sup>67</sup> "Coronavirus fears prompt Ontario university to move classes online - should others?" *Global News*, March 11, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6659807/coronavirus-universities-colleges-classes-cancelled/>; "Shift to online learning due to COVID-19 requires rethink of teaching: experts," *National Post*, March 16, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/shift-to-online-learning-due-to-covid-19-requires-rethink-of-teaching-experts>.

<sup>68</sup> "About us," *Contact North*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://contactnorth.ca/about-us>.

<sup>69</sup> "About," *eCampusOntario*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.ecampusontario.ca/about/>.

**Principle:** Satellite campuses in rural and northern regions should be able to provide the same quality and proportional diversity of support services as their main campuses.

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

**Concern:** There are few satellite campuses that are geographically accessible to rural and northern communities.

**Concern:** Existing strategic mandate agreements do not adequately articulate the role of satellite campuses in ensuring institutional differentiation under the province's differentiation policy framework.

**Concern:** Given their smaller student populations, satellite campuses often do not have a sufficient level of financial support to offer quality and diversified support services to their students.

**Concern:** Because of the lack of funding given to them, satellite campuses are often reliant on part-time or overworked faculty and staff to educate and support their students

**Concern:** Students attending satellite campuses in rural and northern regions often pay for ancillary services that only exist on the main campuses of their universities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should ensure mandatory student consultation before the approval of any satellite campus.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should mandate that satellite campuses in rural and northern communities comply with the Ontario differentiation policy framework, both prior to approval and throughout their operation.

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

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should establish envelope funding to increase the amount of full-time staff and faculty working at satellite campuses

Satellite campuses have become valuable tools of large universities to expand the reach of their institution into less densely populated areas. Distinct from multi-campus models like that seen with Wilfrid Laurier University, satellite campuses are detached segments of larger universities which tend to be in less populated regions, and with more specialized programs specific to a given region. The spread of post-secondary education in Ontario is undeniably centered around southern Ontario and its urban areas, resulting in increased accessibility for people in those areas. However, this has not aided in increasing the accessibility for individuals in rural and northern areas to attend a university or college. Satellite campuses may act as a remedy for this uneven growth, as they drastically shorten travel times, and offer logical pathways to post-secondary education for individuals in these areas. Furthermore, universities and their satellite campuses bolster local economies through the settlement and retention of students and recent graduates.

Despite the many benefits offered by satellite campuses, there are several issues which exist in their framework, limiting their potential to reach students in more remote areas. First, as a result of their size, satellite campuses have limited resources, and are therefore unable to offer the same level of service to students as their larger "parent" counterparts.

Students who attend a satellite campus should have access to the necessary services to succeed academically, personally and financially. To this end, satellite campuses in rural and northern regions should be able to provide the same quality and proportional diversity of support services as their main



campuses and have adequate resources to provide a high quality education and a safe learning environment for all students. However, not all satellite campuses have the means to adequately do this as a result of being under-resourced due to funding constraints.<sup>70</sup> This can result in students having to travel to the “main” campus to access services that they are paying for through ancillary fees, despite many being geographically inaccessible to students on satellite campuses. To address these concerns, the provincial government should regulate the per-student level of funding on satellite campuses and should establish envelope funding or special purpose grants to enhance the level of support services at these campuses. A similar approach should be taken to resolve the issues of satellite campuses often being reliant on part-time or overworked faculty and staff to educate and support their students, by establishing envelope funding to increase the amount of full-time staff and faculty working at satellite campuses. Successful program and service development is crucial to the development and growth of satellite campuses. OUSA agrees with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations in their vision of “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”.<sup>71</sup>

The Ontario Differentiation Policy aims to cater toward a broader scope of learners, therefore satellite campuses should directly align with the provincial differentiation policy’s six component framework; considering the necessary needs of its students and providing programs that are suited for rural and northern students in particular. Existing strategic mandates do not include institutional differentiation and there are no mandates from the provincial government that require institutions to adhere to the Framework. The provincial government should mandate that current satellite campuses must comply with the Ontario Differentiation Policy Framework. This would align with existing provincial policy goals, including, the Major Capacity Expansion Policy Framework. This policy states their priority is “ensuring that future large-scale capacity expansion supports long-term post-secondary education priorities, including institutional differentiation”.<sup>72</sup> The provincial government should also consider the role of strategic mandate agreements (SMAs) made between the province and individual institutions. As a provincially mandated agreement, SMAs are a tool that can be used to ensure institutions comply with differentiation goals. However, existing SMAs do not adequately articulate the role of satellite campuses in ensuring institutional differentiation under the province’s differentiation policy framework. Therefore, as institutions enter into new SMAs with the provincial government, special attention should be paid to explicitly articulating how an institution’s satellite campus(es) support institutional differentiation, where applicable.

While it is important for these satellite campuses to be approved and constructed, how they are approved is equally as important. With that being said, student consultation at the institutional level should be made mandatory by the province to ensure that the potential satellite campus works to serve the interests of students as well as the university. The provincial government should mandate that the university strike a task force to discuss how the satellite campus will be built, and what will be included in the final plan. The task force should include student representation from the institution, as well as students from the region where the satellite campus is being proposed. Student representation from the institution should include at least one elected student representative at the undergraduate level, and another elected representative at the graduate level, where applicable. These students can provide insight into what the institution can offer students attending the proposed satellite campus based on their involvement with the institution and knowledge of supports and services provided. Student representation from the region where the satellite campus is being proposed should include prospective students whose access to post-secondary would increase with the construction of a satellite campus in their region, with priority given to underrepresented groups. Consultations with prospective students should be used to better understand

<sup>70</sup> Federica Rossi & Valentina Goglio, “Satellite university campuses and economic development in peripheral regions,” *Studies in Higher Education* 45, no. 1 (2020): 34-54.

<sup>71</sup> Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, *Policy Position on Satellite Campus* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2009), 10.

<sup>72</sup> Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, *Major Capacity Expansion Policy Framework* (Government of Ontario, December 2013).

what would support these students to access post-secondary, what supports they would need, and what programs and areas of study they are looking for.

## CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY CLIMATE

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### ADVISORY COMMITTEE: RURAL AND NORTHERN STUDENTS

**Principle:** The provincial government should have an in-depth understanding of the unique needs of rural and northern students.

**Principle:** Rural and northern students should be consulted in the development of policies that affect their communities.

**Principle:** Research and data that speaks to the experiences of rural and northern students should be readily available and easily accessible.

**Concern:** There is a limited amount of research and information surrounding the issues rural and northern students may face in attending post-secondary institutions.

**Concern:** There is a lack of understanding of how certain policies may affect rural and northern students in comparison to their southern, urban counterparts.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to research the unique needs of rural and northern students.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should establish an Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students that is responsible for advising and supporting the Ministry of Colleges and Universities on the unique needs of rural and northern students.

**Recommendation:** The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be composed of one representative from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, at least one student representative from each of the five northern universities as well as at least five students residing in a rural community.

**Recommendation:** The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be constituted biennially and consulted at least once per academic semester to inform and guide policy developments targeted at improving the post-secondary landscape for rural and northern students.

**Recommendation:** The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be consulted during the development of any materials, programs, or services that may affect rural and northern students.

Students living in rural and northern communities continue to face unique barriers and experiences which may not be mirrored by their peers in southern, urban communities. Currently, there is a lack of understanding of how certain policies may affect rural and northern students in comparison to their southern, urban counterparts and there is limited research on issues rural and northern students may face in attending post-secondary institutions in Ontario. This lack of research and understanding can lead to rural and northern students feeling forgotten and inadvertently harmed by provincial policy decisions. More research is needed for the government and other provincial organizations to have a comprehensive understanding of the unique needs of rural and northern students. The provincial government should therefore task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to research the needs of rural and northern students. The findings and information gathered by HEQCO should be used by the provincial government to inform policy decisions that may affect rural and northern students. This will

help to ensure that the provincial government is making informed decisions and considers rural and northern student perspectives.

However, it is also important that the provincial government consult with rural and northern students to ensure equitable policy decisions and to prevent unintentional harm. To this end, the provincial government should create an Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students. This committee would allow for the provincial government to have a more in-depth understanding of the unique needs of rural and northern students and how their decisions may affect students living in rural and northern communities. This Advisory Committee should be responsible for advising and supporting the Ministry of Colleges and Universities on the unique needs of rural and northern students. The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be composed of one representative from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, at least one student representative from each of the five northern universities, and at least five students residing in a rural community. This composition would allow for equal representation of both rural and northern students. Students representing northern universities should be nominated by the student association from their respective institution. Students representing rural communities should be chosen through an accessible nomination process and decided on by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, considering the diverse makeup of student populations at participating institutions. The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be constituted biennially and consulted at least once per academic semester to inform and guide policy developments targeted at improving the post-secondary landscape in rural and northern communities. The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should also be consulted during the development of any relevant materials that may affect rural and northern students. This would allow for more adequate rural and northern representation during policy decisions and mitigate the negative effects of policy on rural and northern students.

#### CULTURAL PROMOTION

**Principle:** All students should see their identities represented and accurately reflected in their communities and on their campuses.

**Concern:** Northern institutions have greater Indigenous student populations than southern, urban institutions, yet Indigenous students at northern institutions often do not feel represented on their campuses leading to further isolation and marginalization.

**Concern:** Northern institutions often do not dedicate permanent physical space for Indigenous students on campuses to smudge and practice their culture.

**Concern:** Many post-secondary institutions in the province do not offer services in French and do not frequently promote Francophone culture and identity on campus.

**Concern:** Many Francophone students face barriers to access when attempting to study in French.

**Concern:** There is a lack of designated Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ spaces, resources, and education in rural and northern communities resulting in students feeling isolated and alienated among their communities.

**Concern:** Exposure to Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ culture and media is often limited in rural and northern communities leading to greater feelings of intolerance towards the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities and further marginalization of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students.

**Concern:** There is a lack of research on cultural integration and promotion in rural and northern communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should make funding available for the establishment of permanent, physical spaces designated for Indigenous students on campuses across the province.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should create a Post-Secondary Indigenous Cultural Fund to support Indigenous cultural activities at northern post-secondary institutions.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to northern post-secondary institutions for student-led cultural initiatives to encourage the representation of underrepresented groups on campus.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to northern post-secondary institutions for student-led initiatives that promote and enhance Francophone culture.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should incentivize the creation and ongoing maintenance of programs offered in French at post-secondary institutions in the province.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should create an Ontario Culture Strategy that includes a strand targeting northern post-secondary institutions that promote Francophone and Indigenous communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to support Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-led initiatives in rural and northern communities aimed at promoting Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ arts and culture.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide envelope funding to northern institutions to help support the creation and implementation of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ spaces and services.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding for those pursuing research in rural and northern communities with a focus on culture and innovation.

Many students do not see their identities represented and accurately reflected on their campuses and within their communities. This is particularly true for racialized, international, Indigenous, Francophone, Two Spirit, and LGBTQ+ students attending rural and northern post-secondary institutions. Unfortunately, this can often lead to the isolation and further marginalization of students within these communities. In order to address this issue, the provincial government should be incentivizing and investing in cultural initiatives in rural and northern communities to encourage the representation of underrepresented groups on post-secondary campuses, foster a sense of community, and aid in the elimination of cultural discrimination.

Northern institutions have greater Indigenous student populations than southern, urban institutions, yet Indigenous students at northern institutions often do not feel represented on their campuses leading to further isolation and marginalization. Northern institutions often do not have dedicated permanent physical space for Indigenous students on campuses nor do they see their identities represented in programs and services. In addition, there is a lack of space available for Indigenous students to smudge and practice their culture. An important part of ensuring the success of Indigenous students is by prioritizing their wellbeing. To do this the government and post-secondary institutions must invest in culturally-relevant services and programming.

One way post-secondary institutions can offer culturally-relevant programming for Indigenous students and address the ongoing feeling of alienation is through the introduction of physical spaces dedicated for Indigenous culture and learning. The introduction of these spaces can contribute to a sense of belonging and community as it provides a space for Indigenous students to embrace their culture and traditions and for non-Indigenous students to learn more about Indigenous culture. An example of a successful permanent space for Indigenous students is Laurentian University's Indigenous Sharing and Learning Centre.<sup>73</sup> The Indigenous Sharing and Learning Centre has served as an example of what can happen when space is dedicated to enhancing cultural, social, and academic support for Indigenous learners. This

<sup>73</sup> "Indigenous Sharing and Learning Centre," *Laurentian University*, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://laurentian.ca/indigenous-programs/islc>.

space provides students with informal study and learning spaces, creates work and teaching spaces for Indigenous education program staff and Elders, serves as a primary space for Indigenous teaching, as well as social and cultural events for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Since the introduction of this space in 2017,<sup>74</sup> students have been able to better connect with Indigenous culture, Indigenous students have felt a greater sense of community on their campus, and Laurentian University has seen greater levels of understanding and collaboration among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The provincial government should also create a Post-Secondary Indigenous Cultural Fund to support Indigenous cultural activities at northern post-secondary institutions. This fund should be available to students and faculty to help support Indigenous cultural initiatives and the projects which seek to bring culturally-relevant programs and services to northern institutions.

Most Francophones living in Ontario are located in rural and northern communities.<sup>75</sup> Despite there being a large population of Francophones in rural and northern communities, many Francophone students still face significant barriers to access when attempting to study in French. This is due to a lack of resources dedicated to Francophone programs and services. Despite the introduction of a French university, many Francophone students from rural and northern communities still require French language programs and services to be provided at northern institutions. Many students are unable to leave their home communities in order to attend a French-language institution located in southern Ontario. This can be largely attributed to the high costs of relocating from their home community to the Greater Toronto Area. In order to address the high demand of French programs and services at northern institutions, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should incentivize the creation and ongoing maintenance of French programs at post-secondary institutions in northern Ontario. By incentivizing northern institutions to create more French programs, the Ontario government would also provide more opportunity for those who speak French as a first language to study in northern Ontario. In addition to programs and services, many Francophone students do not feel adequately represented on their campuses and within their communities. Many post-secondary institutions in Ontario do not offer services in French and most are not fully bilingual. Adequate promotion of Francophone culture and identity on campuses is severely lacking. To ensure Francophone students feel adequately represented on their campuses the provincial government should provide grant funding for student-led initiatives which promote and enhance Francophone culture at post-secondary institutions. Grant funding should be allocated to students or student groups who are implementing initiatives that meet at least one of the following objectives:

- (1) Positive relationship with the French language – the activity allows people to have a feeling of competence regarding their French language abilities.
- (2) Cultural acquisition – the activity allows people to discover Francophone culture (e.g., discovering Francophone public figures and persons in a field of activity, history, food, etc.).
- (3) Development of self-determination – the activity allows people to gain a feeling of independence, competence, and a sense of belonging in the Francophone community.
- (4) Identity negotiation – the activity allows people to define themselves in relationship to the French language and Francophone culture.
- (5) Awareness and engagement – the activity allows people to have experiences that require critical thinking and making a positive change in the Francophone community.
- (6) Community leadership – the activity allows people to contribute to the vitality of the Francophone community while developing their leadership skills and engaging people, creating a project/event in partnership with Francophone public figures, business people, or community organizations (e.g., organizing an Ontario Francophonie celebration day or promoting French-language services in the community).

Those living in rural and northern communities often have less exposure to non-traditional gender roles and expression which can lead to greater levels of homophobia and cause Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students to feel isolated from their communities. Exposure to Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ culture and media

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> “Profile of the Francophone population in Ontario - 2016,” *Government of Ontario*, updated January 17, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/profile-francophone-population-ontario-2016#section-2>.

is often limited in rural and northern communities leading to greater feelings of intolerance towards the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities and the further marginalization of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students. To promote the inclusion, acceptance, and representation of the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities, the provincial government should provide grant funding to support Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-led initiatives in rural and northern communities aimed at promoting Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ arts and culture. This funding should be given to students or student groups who are implementing initiatives with the goal of improving understanding, recognition, and acceptance of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities on their campuses. Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ students living in rural and northern communities often face a unique set of challenges. While rural and northern students should have the same access to Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific resources and care as their counterparts in other areas of the province, the under-resourcing of these areas can often lead to a deficiency in adequate support and services for Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students. A deficiency of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific spaces and resources can lead students to feel isolated and alienated among their communities. Another way to improve the overall safety and experience of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students in rural and northern communities is to ensure adequate resources are being provided to support the creation and implementation of LGBTQ+ specific spaces, resources, and education.

The consistent promotion of culture on campuses and in communities continues to be a problem, especially in rural and northern communities. However, culture is the key to a vibrant society. Culture also provides important social and economic benefits. With improved learning and health, increased tolerance, and opportunities to come together with others, culture enhances our quality of life and increases overall well-being for both individuals and communities.<sup>76</sup> For this reason, the provincial government should prioritize the consistent promotion of culture within Ontario, including on post-secondary campuses through the creation of an Ontario Culture Strategy that includes a strand targeting post-secondary institutions, promoting Francophone and Indigenous communities on rural and northern campuses. Similar to the Ontario Culture Strategy which was introduced in 2016, the Ontario government should create a strategy for addressing gaps in cultural promotion in the province. This strategy would allow for inter-ministerial collaboration between the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, the Ministry of Francophone Affairs, the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, and any other relevant ministries. By introducing a culture strategy, the Ontario government would be able to identify and address areas requiring further awareness and carve out a vision for culture in Ontario. In addition to a provincial culture strategy, the provincial government should provide grant funding for those pursuing research in rural and northern communities with a focus on culture and innovation. This would help to address the lack of research on cultural integration and promotion in rural and northern communities and allow for the provincial government and other decision-making bodies to be well-informed in their decisions.

## SAFETY AND SECURITY

**Principle:** All rural and northern students should be able to feel safe and welcome on their campus and in their community regardless of their race, religion, sexuality, gender identity or expression.

**Concern:** International students and racialized students often face higher levels of racism and discrimination within rural and northern communities.

**Concern:** Systemic issues facing rural and northern students are less likely to be understood and addressed due to a lack of research on rural and northern students and the issues they face in accessing and attending post-secondary institutions.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should collaborate with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations to develop, make available, and implement tiered training for faculty, in

<sup>76</sup> Abigail Gilmore, *Raising our quality of life: The importance of investment in arts and culture* (Centre for Labour and Social Studies, November 2014).

consultation with Indigenous students, staff, and faculty, on Indigenous culture and supporting rural and northern students.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding for northern institutions to provide Indigenous cultural competency and anti-racism training for every employee.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide envelope funding for international student support centres at northern post-secondary institutions to provide counselling and support in response to international students facing discrimination on campus.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide envelope funding for northern post-secondary institutions to expand their counselling and support services to support racialized domestic and international students facing discrimination on campus.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should, in consultation with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students, amend the Anti-Racism Impact Assessment to be suitable for implementation by post-secondary institutions.

**Recommendation:** The Lieutenant Governor in Council should introduce a regulation requiring publicly-assisted, post-secondary institutions to apply the amended Anti-Racism Impact Assessment framework to all policies and programs.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should conduct a climate survey for rural and northern students to identify key concerns and issues regarding safety and security on campus and in the community.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should renew their Anti-Racism Strategy to address issues of racism at post-secondary institutions in rural and northern communities.

During OUSA's consultation process, safety was cited as an issue for many students living in rural and northern communities. All rural and northern students should be able to feel safe and welcome on their campus and within their community regardless of their race, religion, sexuality, gender identity or expression. However, that is not currently the case. International students and racialized students often face higher levels of racism and discrimination within rural and northern communities.<sup>77</sup> Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students living in rural and northern communities can experience greater levels of homophobia and feelings of isolation within their communities.<sup>78</sup> While these systemic issues facing rural and northern students exist, they are less likely to be understood and addressed due to a lack of research on rural and northern students and the issues they face in accessing and attending post-secondary institutions. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of these systemic issues, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should conduct a climate survey for rural and northern students to identify key concerns and issues regarding safety and security on campus and in the community.

To address safety concerns raised by rural and northern students, more prevention and response measures are needed. Prevention is the first step to ensuring students do not face hate and discrimination on campus and within their communities. As a commitment to prevent hate and discrimination, the provincial government should renew their Anti-Racism Strategy, with attention to addressing issues of racism in rural and northern communities. The provincial government should also, in consultation with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students,

<sup>77</sup> Kate Rutherford, "International students describe threats, intolerance while in Sudbury," *CBC*, September 11, 2019, online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/diversity-discrimination-international-students-cambrian-laurentian-1.5256577>; Eric Andrew-Gee, "A faded mosaic: Thunder Bay's struggle to attract and retain immigrants," *Globe and Mail*, July 19, 2019, online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-a-faded-mosaic-thunder-bays-struggle-to-attract-and-retain/>.

<sup>78</sup> Anik Dennie, "The effects of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in high school physical education classes, school sports and community sports on future sports and physical activity participation: a retrospective study," MKH thesis (Laurentian University, 2019).

amend the Anti-Racism Impact Assessment to be suitable for implementation by post-secondary institutions. The Lieutenant Governor in Council, within its powers according to section 13(4) and the *Anti-Racism Act*, should introduce a regulation requiring publicly-assisted post-secondary institutions to apply the Anti-Racism Impact Assessment framework to all policies and programs. These steps would not only show a commitment in preventing hate and discrimination on the part of the provincial government, but it would also help to make post-secondary institutions a more welcoming place for rural and northern students with intersecting identities. Another important aspect to prevention is building community-campus relationships to foster de-stigmatization and anti-racism actions. Through the implementation process of the Anti-Racism Strategy, the provincial government and municipalities should aid (where applicable) in bridging the gap between community and campus relations and encourage collaboration among all applicable bodies in addressing this important issue.

Education is also an important part in preventing hate. In post-secondary learning environments faculty, staff, and frontline workers often set the tone on campus and have a responsibility to ensure that all students can feel safe and welcome. However, many faculty and staff do not have a deep understanding of how to engage with students from different cultures and backgrounds. Further training is needed in order to ensure that all students are treated appropriately, and faculty and staff have a basic understanding of the impact racism and discrimination can have on students. To address this concern, the provincial government should collaborate with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations to develop, make available, and implement tiered-faculty training, in consultation with Indigenous students and staff/faculty, on Indigenous culture and supporting northern students. Due to the lack of resources that some northern institutions may face, this kind of training is not always easy to provide. Therefore, the provincial government should also provide grant funding for northern institutions to provide Indigenous cultural competency and anti-racism training for every employee. This would allow northern institutions to start taking a more systemic approach in addressing and preventing hate and discrimination before it occurs.

In the event that hate and discrimination against students does occur, northern post-secondary institutions should be well equipped to support their students. However, currently many international student support centres at northern institutions are either underfunded or unable to properly address the unique needs of these students. To allow northern institutions to properly support their students, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide specific envelope funding for international student support centres at northern institutions to provide counselling and support in response to students facing racism on campus. It is also important to expand general counselling services to ensure domestic students who are racialized are also adequately supported. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should therefore also provide specific envelope funding for northern institutions to expand their counselling and support services in order to better support racialized students facing discrimination on campus. By further supporting and expanding these vital resources, students attending northern institutions who may be experiencing discrimination on campus can be better supported and they can feel safer within their campus community.

## HEALTH CARE

**Principle:** All students should have access to adequate health services regardless of their geographic location.

**Principle:** Access to health services should not have financial barriers or burdens.

**Principle:** An individual has the right to choose to keep their health information and concerns private and protected from disclosure.

**Principle:** All students should have equal access to receive safe and proper care.

**Concern:** There is little research available on the specific health care needs of students attending northern post-secondary institutions.



**Concern:** Rural and northern communities face unique health challenges based on their isolation and geography.

**Concern:** Rural and northern communities have smaller populations which raises unique concerns around anonymity and privacy within the community when accessing health care services.

**Concern:** The prevalence of mental health issues and the rates of suicide in rural and northern communities are higher than in southern, urban centres.

**Concern:** Health care services are more difficult to access in rural and northern communities, often requiring travel to urban centres in southern regions of the province.

**Concern:** Costs associated with travel and accommodations to access health care services for rural and northern students present as financial and emotional barriers.

**Concern:** Health care on post-secondary campuses is not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and is currently being neglected.

**Concern:** There are no Ontario Health Teams located in the North East or North West Local Health Integration Networks.

**Concern:** Health risk factors are of greater prevalence in rural and northern communities, putting these students at a greater risk for developing chronic diseases.

**Concern:** A lack of physicians in rural and northern areas, increased hospital wait times, and lack of timely access to primary care providers hinders the quality of health care available to rural and northern students.

**Concern:** A lack of knowledge on the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities in rural and northern regions can often lead to Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ health care needs being overlooked.

**Concern:** Diverse health needs of rural and northern students, including those who are part of Indigenous, Francophone, multicultural, and Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities, are not being addressed in a culturally appropriate manner.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Health should expand eligibility for Northern Health Travel Grants to include students who wish to travel to receive health care in a more timely and culturally appropriate manner.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide targeted funding to the Ontario Health Agency for expanded access to virtual health in order to connect inbound rural and northern students with their hometown or preferred physicians, as well as specialists.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Health should conduct research in order to better understand the barriers of relocation for medical professionals moving to rural and northern communities, in order to provide recommendations such as additional compensation and incentives that may be used to increase relocation of health professionals to these areas.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should direct Health Quality Ontario to conduct research on the specific health care needs of students attending northern post-secondary institutions from a population health perspective of northern and Indigenous health.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Health should implement proactive measures to minimize health risk factors for students at northern post-secondary institutions by offering additional education, outreach, and incentives for students to practice healthy lifestyle habits.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students and community organizations, to provide all front-line staff health care workers in rural and northern communities with Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific training.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Indigenous students and community organizations, to provide all front-line staff health care workers in rural and northern communities with Indigenous health and wellness specific training.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should allocate additional funding for training of rural and northern health care providers in the mental health and addiction field to ensure sufficient personnel and resources are available to address addiction, crisis, and mental health concerns in a more accessible and timely manner.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Health should partner with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, post-secondary institutions, and students to develop health promotion activities and resources for students that increase health and wellness education, minimize unhealthy behaviours, and prevent chronic diseases.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should offer incentives for rural and northern health care providers to apply for approval as Ontario Health Teams with a goal to provide access to supported health care transitions in rural and northern communities.

Students attending post-secondary institutions in northern regions have many of the same health care needs as the student population more generally. However, they also have some distinct health care needs and face barriers to accessing health care services that are unique to their regional location. Rural and northern students typically have poorer health behaviors and status, as well as limited access to health care when compared to their southern, urban counterparts.<sup>79</sup> It is important that these concerns and barriers be addressed, as geographic location should not be an impediment to accessing adequate health services. Notably, there has been little focus on the specific health care needs of students attending northern post-secondary institutions in research,<sup>80</sup> a gap that could be addressed by Health Quality Ontario (HQO). HQO is the provincial advisor on health care quality in Ontario with a mandate to: “monitor and report on how the health system is performing; provide guidance on important quality issues; assess evidence to determine what constitutes optimal care; partner with patients and give them a voice in shaping a quality health system; and promote continuous quality improvement aimed at substantial and sustainable positive change in health care.”<sup>81</sup> Within their mandate, HQO could partner with students attending northern post-secondary institutions to assess evidence and report on health care quality for this population.

There is, however, existing evidence to illustrate the concerns and barriers faced by people living in rural and northern communities more broadly, many of which also apply to students attending post-secondary institutions in these regions. Rural and northern communities “face considerable health disparities when compared to those in more urbanized and southern regions.”<sup>82</sup> Key issues that have been identified include, but are not limited to, equity, access, and culturally safe care.<sup>83</sup> These challenges are a particular concern when it comes to mental health, as the prevalence of mental health disorders and suicide rates

<sup>79</sup> “Access to Quality Medical and Health Services”.

<sup>80</sup> One example of research targeting rural and northern student populations in Ontario is: Sophie J. Nash, “Help-seeking behaviours of university students in a Northern Ontario community,” M.A. Thesis (Laurentian University, 2018).

<sup>81</sup> “Our Mandate, Vision and Mission,” *Health Quality Ontario*, accessed February 20, 2020, <https://www.hqontario.ca/About-Us/Our-Mandate-and-Our-People/Our-Mandate-Vision-and-Mission>.

<sup>82</sup> Sophie J. Nash, “Help-seeking behaviours of university students in a Northern Ontario community,” M.A. Thesis (Laurentian University, 2018) [Nash, “Help seeking behaviours”].

<sup>83</sup> Julie Duff Cloutier, Nichola Hoffman, Kritsin Moin & John Dabous, *Recommendations: Health Care Priorities in Northern Ontario Aboriginal Communities* (Northern Policy Institute, Briefing Note No. 7, October 2016) [*Health Care Priorities in Northern Ontario Aboriginal Communities*].

are higher in rural and northern communities.<sup>84</sup> In addition to experiencing more acute and chronic health care needs, rural and northern communities must also contend with unique barriers to accessing adequate health care services. This is primarily due to limited resources, which results in fewer services and practitioners in the region.<sup>85</sup> The provincial governments should allocate additional funding and training for health care providers in the mental health and addiction field to ensure sufficient personnel and resources are available to address addiction, crisis, and mental health concerns of students in a more accessible and timely manner.

The limited resources and support services available to students living in rural and northern communities creates additional challenges and barriers to care. One such challenge arises for students who may face lengthy wait times to access care as a result of disproportionately limited resources within the community.<sup>86</sup> This can force students to travel to urban centres to access specialized treatment, which requires a significant time investment and can be financially burdensome.<sup>87</sup> This can be a barrier for anyone living in a rural and/or northern community, but it is uniquely challenging for students who have limited spare time and have significant financial commitments that make it difficult to afford additional expenses. The health needs of rural and northern students are not being adequately addressed and there needs to be a solution until additional physicians and specialists are accessible in a more timely fashion in these regions. The Ministry of Health should therefore expand Northern Health Travel Grants to include students who need to travel to receive health care in a more timely manner. Geographic location and financial burdens should not impact equitable access to health care providers.

The Ministry of Health has implemented new procedures for providing integrated health care through the formation of Ontario Health and Ontario Health Teams (OHT).<sup>88</sup> However, rural and northern communities face a lack of access to these new services putting them at a disadvantage. There are currently twenty-four OHTs, designed to achieve better coordination between health care services resulting in increased organization, more positive health care experiences, better health outcomes, as well as improved clinical guidance.<sup>89</sup> Despite clear evidence that additional resources are needed in rural and northern regions to support equitable access to health care in these regions, no OHTs have been developed in either of the North East or North West Local Integrated Health Networks (LHIN),<sup>90</sup> which make up the two largest LHINs and represent nearly 80 percent of Ontario's land mass. Together, the North East and North West LHINs have a combined population of roughly 800,000 people.<sup>91</sup> "Interdisciplinary health care providers in Northern Ontario may benefit from streamlined access to integrated Electronic Medical Records" (EMRs), due to their positive impacts on communication, collaboration, patient care, and reduced wait times.<sup>92</sup> OHT formations have a similar foundation and objective. The benefits of OHTs should be accessible to rural and northern communities, and the provincial government can support the expansion of OHTs into these regions by providing incentives for health care providers to apply, supporting the creation of OHTs in under-served areas.

Shortages and maldistribution of health care providers in rural and northern Ontario means that people in the northern LHIN regions are less likely to have a family doctor, nurse practitioner or other form of regular health care provider.<sup>93</sup> A study on the geographical distribution of physicians in Canada found that, in 2005, only 9.4 percent of physicians were located in rural areas, despite these regions being home

<sup>84</sup> Nash, "Help seeking behaviours".

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid; Patrick Timony, Kelly D. Coons, and Mallorie Leduc, Setting Priorities for Northern Ontario's Health Policy Agenda (Northern Policy Institute, Briefing Note, March 2015).

<sup>88</sup> "Ontario Health Agency," *Government of Ontario*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-health-agency>.

<sup>89</sup> "Become an Ontario Health Team," *Government of Ontario*, last modified March 26, 2020, <http://health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/connectedcare/oht/#FAQ>; "Improving Health Care in Ontario," *Government of Ontario*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/improving-health-care-ontario#section-1>.

<sup>90</sup> "Ontario LHINs," *Ontario's LHINs*, accessed March 30 2020, <http://www.lhins.on.ca/>.

<sup>91</sup> Health Quality Ontario, *Health in the North: A report on geography and the health of people in Ontario's two northern regions* (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2017) [*Health in the North*].

<sup>92</sup> *Health Care Priorities in Northern Ontario Aboriginal Communities*.

<sup>93</sup> *Health in the North*.

to 21.1 percent of the population.<sup>94</sup> This disparity means that people in rural communities are less likely to be able to access their primary care provider on the same or next day when sick and are less likely to be able to see a specialist within 30 days; the standard in other areas in the province. Because access to primary care and specialists is limited it is often associated with increased wait times.<sup>95</sup> There is therefore a need to recruit and retain rural and northern physicians to help reduce health inequities in these communities. The Ontario Government currently has Northern and Rural Recruitment and Retention initiatives that provide for taxable and financial incentives to physicians who establish and continue to practice full-time in certain northern, rural communities in the province. However, the continued disparity in the number of physicians means that more needs to be done. Further research is required to determine barriers to physician recruitment and retention in these areas.

Another challenge that arises when there are limited resources and support services available for rural and northern students centres on privacy and confidentiality. All students should be able to access health care confidentially, particularly where there is higher risk of stigmatization or fear of negative judgement. Rural communities are defined by their small population size, and northern communities - and northern university campuses in particular - commonly have smaller populations than their urban counterparts. For these regions, having smaller communities and fewer points of access can amplify privacy concerns around health care needs and “concerns regarding stigma associated with mental illness.”<sup>96</sup> An American study of help-seeking behaviours of undergraduate students in rural communities “found that the most common barriers reported were “perceived stigma” and a lack of privacy. Participants responded that they were concerned with being perceived by peers as being unable to keep up with academic demands and that, as a result of feeling guilty, embarrassed, and mistrusting of others, they didn’t access on-campus services.”<sup>97</sup> Although this study was done outside of Ontario, the cultural context of stigmatization around mental illness and associated feelings of fear and shame is strikingly similar.

One promising practice that can help alleviate many of these challenges is access to virtual care through online or telehealth services. “Virtual care has been defined as any interaction between patients and/or members of their circle of care, occurring remotely, using any forms of communication or information technologies with the aim of facilitating or maximizing the quality and effectiveness of patient care.”<sup>98</sup> Virtual care addresses limited resources and associated challenges in “that it allows service users to meet with specialists without having to travel or relocate, protects patient anonymity, facilitates staff education, and reduces a sense of isolation for local service providers.”<sup>99</sup> However, not all communities have the funding or resources to support virtual care networks.<sup>100</sup> Access to current Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) units are not readily available to the general public of patients outside of the institution of which they reside.<sup>101</sup> While Canada is an international leader in the realm of virtual care,<sup>102</sup> and the OTN is one of the most active and successful virtual care networks in the world,<sup>103</sup> there is still more that can be done to ensure students attending rural and northern universities have equal access to these services. It is recommended that the provincial government support rural and northern students by providing additional, targeted funding for OTN to develop initiatives and programming to meet the specific needs of these students. This would help increase access to health care and address barriers related to geographic location, wait times, access to specialists and preferred health care providers as well as concerns around anonymity.

<sup>94</sup> Raymond W. Pong & J. Roger Pitblado, *Geographic Distribution of Physicians in Canada: Beyond How Many and Where* (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2005).

<sup>95</sup> *Health in the North*.

<sup>96</sup> Patrick Timony, Kelly D. Coons, and Mallorie Leduc, *Setting Priorities for Northern Ontario’s Health Policy Agenda* (Northern Policy Institute, Briefing Note, March 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Hussain et al. (2013), as cited in Nash, “Help seeking behaviours”.

<sup>98</sup> CMA Health Summit, *Virtual Care in Canada: Discussion Paper* (Canadian Medical Association, August 2019), online: [https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/News/Virtual\\_Care\\_discussionpaper\\_v2EN.pdf](https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/News/Virtual_Care_discussionpaper_v2EN.pdf) [*Virtual care in Canada*].

<sup>99</sup> Nash, “Help seeking behaviours”.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> “Access to Quality Medical and Health Services”.

<sup>102</sup> *Virtual care in Canada*.

<sup>103</sup> Ontario Telemedicine Network, *Connecting People and Care: Annual Report 2018-2019*, online: <https://otn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/OTNAnnualReport-1819-final.pdf>.

Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students living in rural and northern communities often face an additional set of challenges. While rural and northern students should have the same access to Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific resources and care as their counterparts in other areas of the province, the under-resourcing of these areas and lack of knowledge can often lead to a deficiency in adequate support and services for Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students. This can be damaging as a lack of knowledge on the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ communities can often lead to health care needs specific to these communities being overlooked and patients left with improper care. The Northern Ontario Health Equity Strategy highlights challenges transgender patients face in finding health care providers who provide adequate care and treatment. This was linked to a lack of training available for health care providers on Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-sensitive care.<sup>104</sup> In order to alleviate these issues and provide equitable care, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students, to provide all front-line staff health care workers in rural and northern communities with Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific training.

It is equally important that the province take steps not only to respond to health challenges in rural and northern communities, but also that the province invests in prevention efforts to eliminate preventable illnesses. Health challenges linked to smoking, substance abuse, obesity and physical inactivity are more prominent in northern communities. Unhealthy lifestyle factors are linked to the development of acute and chronic medical conditions and diseases: 1 in 5 Ontarians, age 12 and older, have two or more chronic health conditions, and rural and northern residents are at an increased risk for developing chronic health conditions.<sup>105</sup> In order to minimize the risk of chronic disease in rural and northern regions, additional outreach resources should be used for health promotion and disease prevention information in these communities. More research is needed, along with a needs assessment, to develop effective community-based programs for students at northern institutions. Involving patients in their own health care can limit the growing prevalence of chronic illness, and therefore outreach to higher-risk communities such as northern universities may help reduce health risks within their population. The Ministry of Health should partner with post-secondary institutions and students to develop health promotion activities and resources for students to increase education, minimize unhealthy behaviours, and prevent chronic diseases.

The Patient First Act ensures that the province of Ontario will work to ensure that all patients have faster access to reliable, efficient, and high quality health care services.<sup>106</sup> These patient rights must be enforced throughout all parts of Ontario with specific focus on the unique needs of rural and northern populations. Continuous efforts are needed to achieve health goals and positive outcomes for our students. Health care recommendations in this paper are designed to achieve the integration of improved access to culturally safe health care services for the unique needs of rural and northern students.

## EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

**Principle:** Post-secondary institutions should prepare students for the workforce with up-to-date and innovative equipment and pedagogies.

**Principle:** Students should be compensated for the valuable knowledge and input they provide when assisting on faculty-led and strategy-oriented projects for their institutions.

<sup>104</sup> Health Quality Ontario, *Northern Ontario Health Equity Strategy* (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2018).

<sup>105</sup> Health Quality Ontario, *Measuring Up 2018: A Yearly Report on How Ontario's Health System is Performing* (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> Government of Ontario, *Patients First: Action Plan for Health Care* (Queen's Printer for Ontario, February 2015).

**Principle:** All students should have an opportunity to experience working in their field of study prior to graduation.

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

**Principle:** Students at northern institutions should have access to opportunities to develop the skills needed to ensure their success and employability in any part of the province.

**Principle:** Students should have input on government decisions that impact their access to employment.

**Concern:** There are limited experiential learning opportunities in rural and northern areas compared to southern and urban areas.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should introduce a stream under the Career Ready Fund to develop and expand innovative and sustainable partnerships that create experiential learning opportunities in rural and northern communities.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should consult with the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students for feedback and input on any decision that may impact employment opportunities for students within these communities.

Experiential learning is an important and fundamental approach to learning to ensure students have the proper skills to succeed after graduation. Prior to graduation, all students, regardless of where or what they study, should have the opportunity to experience working in their field. These opportunities help to prepare students for the workforce by helping them develop a wide-range of skills and better understand what future employers expect of them. These opportunities are equally important for students at northern institutions, yet these regions offer limited experiential learning opportunities compared to southern, urban regions, putting northern institution students at a disadvantage.

Internally, post-secondary institutions have an opportunity to provide students with experiential learning opportunities by including students in institutional projects to fulfill their long-term strategic plans and meet the institution's goals and vision. However, at northern institutions these projects are typically underfunded and there is little supervision by faculty. Students are a valuable addition, reducing the workload of staff and faculty driving the projects and bringing unique insight for higher quality project outcomes. Despite the contributions made by students and the work they do, students are sometimes expected to participate without compensation or recognition in the form of course credits. It is unrealistic and unfair to assume students should work on these projects without recognition. Institutions should therefore offer students placement and credit opportunities to engage in these projects, recognizing the work done and acknowledging the skills and experience that students will be able to translate into the workforce. This would additionally help to increase the amount of experiential learning opportunities in northern regions.

Students also require experiential learning opportunities in their communities. However, northern institutions and local employers are hesitant to hire and offer placement opportunities to students, primarily due to fewer employment opportunities. Between 2003 and 2018, net employment numbers in northern Ontario declined by 23,600.<sup>107</sup> One way that the provincial government can address this concern is by introducing a new stream under the Career Ready Fund, with specific funding for employers and institutions to develop and expand innovative and sustainable partnerships that create experiential learning opportunities in rural and northern communities. This stream should be open to a wide range of experiential learning approaches, including, but not limited to, co-ops, internships, placements, and work-integrated learning opportunities. It should also encourage employers and institutions to promote non-traditional industries in the region where students may not be able to gain experience without

<sup>107</sup> Ontario Chamber of Commerce, *Ontario Economic Report 2019* (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2019).

additional support. However, it should also be open to opportunities in dominant industries in the region as well so that students are not limited by type of opportunity and so that they can support their local communities.

It is particularly important that the provincial government consult with rural and northern students when making decisions that will impact their employment opportunities. The unique experiences of these students are not often considered, and they may need different solutions than their southern, urban peers. The provincial government should therefore commit to consulting with the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students to help make recommendations and look for insight. Doing so will enable the development of more insightful and inclusive policies that are most effective for the students impacted.

#### STUDENT - COMMUNITY RETENTION

**Principle:** Communities should make retaining student talent a priority to strengthen local rural and northern economies.

**Principle:** Retention of students from a variety of programs and backgrounds helps to diversify rural and northern economies.

**Principle:** Students should have viable employment opportunities available to them in rural and northern communities.

**Principle:** Students should have a basic knowledge of the employment opportunities available to them in their communities.

**Concern:** Students who are not given viable employment opportunities in their home communities are more likely to travel to large, urban centres to meet this need, rather than remain in their home community.

**Concern:** Rural and northern communities are often reliant on a single industry and lack diversified industries that are needed to strengthen the economy.

**Concern:** There are currently few jobs in rural and northern communities, leading new graduates to seek employment in larger, urban centres.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should incentivize new graduates to work in rural and northern municipalities through the use of tax credits and reduction of student loans to strengthen student-community retention and support economic growth in the community.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide grant funding for public sector employers in rural and northern communities to create internships for students.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should establish a program, in partnership with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and/or the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario, to establish experiential learning programs, internships, and co-op opportunities, for post-secondary students.

Access to employment and experiential learning opportunities are important for student-community retention, benefiting both students and their communities. However, students are less likely to remain in, or return to, rural and northern communities following post-secondary. There are many reasons why students may choose to leave rural and northern communities, including family, community, climate, and isolation, but where these factors are not pushing students to leave rural and northern areas it is often lack of employment opportunities that has the biggest impact. This is concerning in cases where students would choose to remain in, or return to, these communities but for the lack of employment opportunities available to them, and lack of student retention can have a detrimental impact on a community. OUSA's

biennial student survey found that students from rural and northern communities were more likely to stay in the city where they attended university following graduation compared to students from southern, urban centres.<sup>108</sup> Similar trends have been noticed in rural areas where students are choosing to remain in urban centres to take advantage of greater career opportunities. This loss of graduates is not only an issue for the population levels of rural and northern communities but is also a threat to their economies as well. The provincial government needs to take initiative to offer these students employment and experiential learning opportunities in their local communities, so they can grow personally and professionally, as well as to support Ontario's smaller communities in rural and northern areas.

The discussion surrounding student and population retention in rural and northern communities must be focused around the availability of jobs in these areas. When students progress through their university experience and begin to think about where they would like to settle after graduation, there are several factors at play, but available employment opportunities can have the greatest impact. The availability, or lack thereof, of jobs in a given community is often the determining factor for recent graduates when determining where they will live and work. Because rural and northern communities have fewer employment opportunities, students are less likely to choose to remain, or return to, these communities even in cases where they would otherwise make this choice. Furthermore, rural and northern economies are often dominated by one sector, such as mining or agriculture. This lack of diversity in the local economy is a major push factor for the loss of new graduates to Ontario's southern, urban centres.

To diversify local economies in rural and northern communities, and to attract recent graduates from a multitude of fields, the provincial government should provide grant funding for public sector employers to hire students or recent graduates in municipalities with post-secondary institutions. Public sector staffing is the most effective medium to implement this initiative because of the diversity of work available, including engineers, political scientists, financial service providers, and many others. Creating positions for students and recent graduates in public sector roles creates more opportunities for these individuals to settle in these regions, especially when they do not work in the community's dominant economic sector. Opening positions in the field of governance and politics will also help to strengthen the small municipal governments in these regions by allowing students to assist in bureaucratic functions and to take on projects. Additional positions could be established by a partnership between the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and/or the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO). Together, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and AMO and AMCTO should establish experiential learning programs, internships, and co-op opportunities, for post-secondary students.

Another method to attract the settlement of students and recent graduates is to incentivize local businesses to hire them. Through a tax credit system for hiring students, local businesses will be more inclined to spend their salary budget on student labour which will save them money over time. The provincial government must direct funding towards post-secondary institutions in northern communities so that they can provide more employment opportunities and continue to develop a highly-skilled workforce across Ontario, rather than just the urban centres of the south. The provincial government should also incentivize students to remain or return to rural and northern communities by offering a reduction in the provincial portion of their student financial aid loans. This method of establishing incentives to hire students will be effective in boosting the local economies and encourage settlement in areas which are not seeing growth due to emigrating populations.

<sup>108</sup> Britney De Costa & Martyna Siekanowicz, *Accessibility: Results from the 2017 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2019).



## POLICY STATEMENT

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

**Whereas:** All secondary students in rural and northern communities should be provided with comprehensive information regarding the opportunities to pursue a post-secondary education in Ontario.

**Whereas:** Early outreach is essential to increasing access to post-secondary education for rural and northern students.<sup>109</sup>

**Whereas:** Relationships with Indigenous communities in rural and northern Ontario are essential to bridge educational gaps.

**Whereas:** Post-secondary students from rural and northern communities should be able to access sufficient transportation options to and from their place of permanent residence.

**Whereas:** Rural and northern students should have the same ease of access to, and quality of, support as students living in southern, urban areas.

**Whereas:** Students should have access to materials and resources in their preferred language.

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

**Whereas:** Students at northern institutions require the same level of access to high-speed, broadband internet to complete their post-secondary education as students in southern, urban regions.

**Whereas:** Students at northern institutions should have the same level of access to the modern equipment and tools necessary to prepare for the continuously innovating workforce as students in southern, urban regions.

**Whereas:** Students at northern institutions should have access to online classes with diverse and extensive options to fill gaps in course offerings.

**Whereas:** Students at northern institutions should be able to access lectures for courses they are enrolled in remotely to improve accessibility and attendance.

**Whereas:** Students should have greater access to technology and online resources due to its correlation and effect on academic outcome.

**Whereas:** Satellite campuses can make post-secondary institutions more geographically accessible to students in rural and northern communities by extending an institution’s reach.

**Whereas:** Satellite campuses boost local economies by bringing in large populations of students.

**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 regions should be able to provide the same quality and proportional diversity of support services as their main campuses.

<sup>109</sup> “Planting the Seeds”.

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

**Whereas:** The provincial government should have an in-depth understanding of the unique needs of rural and northern students.

**Whereas:** Rural and northern students should be consulted in the development of policies that affect their communities.

**Whereas:** Research and data that speaks to the experiences of rural and northern students should be readily available and easily accessible.

**Whereas:** All students should see their identities represented and accurately reflected in their communities and on their campuses.

**Whereas:** All rural and northern students should be able to feel safe and welcome on their campus and in their community regardless of their race, religion, sexuality, gender identity or expression.

**Whereas:** All students should have access to adequate health services regardless of their geographic location.

**Whereas:** Access to health services should not have financial barriers or burdens.

**Whereas:** An individual has the right to choose to keep their health information and concerns private and protected from disclosure.

**Whereas:** Post-secondary institutions should prepare students for the workforce with up-to-date and innovative equipment and pedagogies.

**Whereas:** Students should be compensated for the valuable knowledge and input they provide when assisting on faculty-led and strategy-oriented projects for their institutions.

**Whereas:** All students should have an opportunity to experience working in their field of study prior to graduation.

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

**Whereas:** Students at northern institutions should have access to opportunities to develop the skills needed to ensure their success and employability in any part of the province.

**Whereas:** Students should have input on government decisions that impact their access to employment.

**Whereas:** Communities should make retaining student talent a priority to strengthen local rural and northern economies.

**Whereas:** Retention of students from a variety of programs and backgrounds helps to diversify rural and northern economies.

**Whereas:** Students should have viable employment opportunities available to them in rural and northern communities.

**Whereas:** Students should have a basic knowledge of the employment opportunities available to them in their communities.

**Be it resolved that:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should research best practices surrounding rural and northern student orientation programming.

**Be it further resolved that (BIFRT):** The provincial government should provide funding to the Council of Ontario Universities to include a Transition Guide for Rural and Northern Students on their online resources, specifically the Ontario Universities' Application Centre and Ontario Universities' Info.

**BIFRT:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should, based on their mandate to prioritize improving access to post-secondary education, develop guidelines as to what information institutions must share with potential students about their university, prior to enrolment.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide funding to the Ontario University Registrars' Association, the Council of Ontario Universities, and the Ontario Universities' Application Centre to ensure Ontario universities' Regional Fairs reach rural and northern communities with low post-secondary attainment rates.

**BIFRT:** The Council of Ontario Universities should conduct an environmental scan to identify regions with low post-secondary attainment rates and hold Regional Fairs for these students.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide travel subsidies for students in rural and northern communities to attend the Ontario Universities' Fair or Regional Fairs in the nearest region.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should expand the Rural and Northern Student Education Fund within the Geographic Circumstances Grant to financially support and target early intervention programs for students in rural and northern communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should create an envelope fund for post-secondary institutions to expand their high school-specific presentations to target rural and northern students using personable outreach and creating awareness of programs and building motivation to pursue a post-secondary education prior to grade twelve.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Education should create a Rural and Northern Education Strategy aimed at addressing specific barriers rural and northern students face and promoting post-secondary education in these areas.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should offer envelope funding to post-secondary institutions to develop a framework to build partnerships and access to early outreach with Indigenous communities in rural and northern regions.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should introduce a Rural and Northern Travel Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students, living 40 kilometers or more from the nearest publicly-assisted institution.

**BIFRT:** The Rural and Northern Travel Grant should be designed to allocate funding to students commensurate with the cost of travel, from their place of permanent residence to the nearest institution of choice.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should introduce an Emergency Travel Grant for students originating from rural and northern communities to supplement barriers to travel in the event of an emergency.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide envelope funding for northern post-secondary institutions to be used for the expansion and maintenance of campus accessibility services.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to incentivize the expansion of resources in French and Indigenous languages for students attending northern post-secondary institutions.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide regular, targeted funding for the expansion and maintenance of the Ontario Universities' Application Centre, Ontario universities' Info, and other relevant provincial-level post-secondary resources to be made available in French, Indigenous, and other languages commonly spoken by students.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide funding for the expansion of Good2Talk to offer access in French and Indigenous languages.

**BIFRT:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario should conduct a study on transportation access and connectivity in rural and northern communities, with specific attention to the needs of rural and northern students as part of its comprehensive regional transportation planning.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Transportation and the Ministry of Infrastructure to develop a long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit plan to address the needs of students in rural and northern communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should amend Ontario Regulation 189/09: Go Transit Service Area to include rural and northern areas.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should facilitate coordination between Metrolinx and the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission in the development and implementation of the long-term, comprehensive, and multimodal inter-regional transit system in rural and northern areas.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should incentivize the private sector through tax credits to assist Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan and improve access to broadband internet for rural and northern communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide a grant to northern institutions to provide students with access to up-to-date technology on campus to increase equality of access to academic resources and support.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide northern post-secondary institutions with purchasing grants to ensure campus computers are equipped with necessary software licenses required for courses, including AutoCad, MatLab, etc.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should continue funding Contact North and eCampus Ontario to support greater online and remote access to courses for students attending northern post-secondary institutions.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should introduce a Technology Accessibility Grant that is open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students who require access to technology off campus.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should ensure mandatory student consultation before the approval of any satellite campus.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should mandate that satellite campuses in rural and northern communities comply with the Ontario differentiation policy framework, both prior to approval and throughout their operation.

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

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should establish envelope funding to increase the amount of full-time staff and faculty working at satellite campuses

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should task the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to research the unique needs of rural and northern students.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should establish an Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students that is responsible for advising and supporting the Ministry of Colleges and Universities on the unique needs of rural and northern students.

**BIFRT:** The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be composed of one representative from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, at least one student representative from each of the five northern universities as well as at least five students residing in a rural community.

**BIFRT:** The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be constituted biennially and consulted at least once per academic semester to inform and guide policy developments targeted at improving the post-secondary landscape for rural and northern students.

**BIFRT:** The Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students should be consulted during the development of any materials, programs, or services that may affect rural and northern students.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should make funding available for the establishment of permanent, physical spaces designated for Indigenous students on campuses across the province.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should create a Post-Secondary Indigenous Cultural Fund to support Indigenous cultural activities at northern post-secondary institutions.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to northern post-secondary institutions for student-led cultural initiatives to encourage the representation of underrepresented groups on campus.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to northern post-secondary institutions for student-led initiatives that promote and enhance Francophone culture.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should incentivize the creation and ongoing maintenance of programs offered in French at post-secondary institutions in the province.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should create an Ontario Culture Strategy that includes a strand targeting northern post-secondary institutions that promote Francophone and Indigenous communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding to support Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-led initiatives in rural and northern communities aimed at promoting Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ arts and culture.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide envelope funding to northern institutions to help support the creation and implementation of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ spaces and services.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding for those pursuing research in rural and northern communities with a focus on culture and innovation.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should collaborate with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations to develop, make available, and implement tiered training for faculty, in consultation with Indigenous students, staff, and faculty, on Indigenous culture and supporting rural and northern students.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding for northern institutions to provide Indigenous cultural competency and anti-racism training for every employee.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide envelope funding for international student support centres at northern post-secondary institutions to provide counselling and support in response to international students facing discrimination on campus.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide envelope funding for northern post-secondary institutions to expand their counselling and support services to support racialized domestic and international students facing discrimination on campus.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should, in consultation with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students, amend the Anti-Racism Impact Assessment to be suitable for implementation by post-secondary institutions.

**BIFRT:** The Lieutenant Governor in Council should introduce a regulation requiring publicly-assisted, post-secondary institutions to apply the amended Anti-Racism Impact Assessment framework to all policies and programs.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should conduct a climate survey for rural and northern students to identify key concerns and issues regarding safety and security on campus and in the community.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should renew their Anti-Racism Strategy to address issues of racism at post-secondary institutions in rural and northern communities.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Health should expand eligibility for Northern Health Travel Grants to include students who wish to travel to receive health care in a more timely and culturally appropriate manner.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide targeted funding to the Ontario Health Agency for expanded access to virtual health in order to connect inbound rural and northern students with their hometown or preferred physicians, as well as specialists.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Health should conduct research in order to better understand the barriers of relocation for medical professionals moving to rural and northern communities, in order to provide recommendations such as additional compensation and incentives that may be used to increase relocation of health professionals to these areas.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should direct Health Quality Ontario to conduct research on the specific health care needs of students attending northern post-secondary institutions from a population health perspective of northern and Indigenous health.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Health should implement proactive measures to minimize health risk factors for students at northern post-secondary institutions by offering additional education, outreach, and incentives for students to practice healthy lifestyle habits.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students and community organizations, to provide all front-line staff health care workers in rural and northern communities with Two Spirit and LGBTQ+-specific training.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should work with the Ministry of Health, in consultation with Indigenous students and community organizations, to provide all front-line staff health care workers in rural and northern communities with Indigenous health and wellness specific training.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should allocate additional funding for training of rural and northern health care providers in the mental health and addiction field to ensure sufficient personnel and resources are available to address addiction, crisis, and mental health concerns in a more accessible and timely manner.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Health should partner with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, post-secondary institutions, and students to develop health promotion activities and resources for students that increase health and wellness education, minimize unhealthy behaviours, and prevent chronic diseases.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should offer incentives for rural and northern health care providers to apply for approval as Ontario Health Teams with a goal to provide access to supported health care transitions in rural and northern communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should introduce a stream under the Career Ready Fund to develop and expand innovative and sustainable partnerships that create experiential learning opportunities in rural and northern communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should consult with the Advisory Committee of Rural and Northern Students for feedback and input on any decision that may impact employment opportunities for students within these communities.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should incentivize new graduates to work in rural and northern municipalities through the use of tax credits and reduction of student loans to strengthen student-community retention and support economic growth in the community.

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide grant funding for public sector employers in rural and northern communities to create internships for students.

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should establish a program, in partnership with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and/or the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario, to establish experiential learning programs, internships, and co-op opportunities, for post-secondary students.