



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of approximately 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

POLICY BRIEF: RURAL AND NORTHERN STUDENTS

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 (HEQCO) 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. 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 (MCU) 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. MCU 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

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 as part of its comprehensive regional transportation planning. MCU 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 HEQCO 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 MCU on the unique needs of rural and northern students. The Advisory Committee should be composed of one representative from MCU, 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, MCU 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, MCU 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.

MCU 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. MCU 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.