

COU Academic Colleagues Committee Report to the Ontario Tech U AC

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Synopsis

This report provides an overview of two meetings held on February 13 & 14, 2024. The Tuesday night meeting was a presentation by an invited speaker followed by a brief discussion while the main COU colleagues meeting occurred on the Wednesday morning. Both meetings were held in a hybrid format (in-person and online) and I attended these in-person.

Background

The objective of the COU Academic Colleagues committee is to support the COU council, consisting of the executive heads of the institution members of the COU, with feedback from academic colleagues concerning COU initiatives.

Meeting Summaries

Evening meeting, February 13, 2024

Conversation with OUSA

Vivian Chiem, President and Malika Dhanani, Executive Director from the Ontario University Student Alliance will join the Academic Colleagues to provide an overview on OUSA and engage in a discussion about various issues affecting students.

Vivian and Malika provided an overview of the role and activities of *Ontario University Student Alliance* (OUSA). The organization represents about 160,000 students. It is membership based and the university student associations choose whether or not to belong. The Ontario Tech Student Association is a member of OUSA. OUSA is student-driven and student-focused. Activities include: advocacy with the government; research and develop policy papers; maintaining an extensive of policy library; and writing op-eds, blogs, social media to stay connected with the broader sector. They tend to focus on taking a non-partisan approach to advocacy and maintaining government relations (rather than the more public-facing activism of other groups like the Canadian Federation of Students). Their current priorities are: housing and transit; mental health; food insecurity; and university sector sustainability. Please see the attachments for further information.

Debrief

Regarding food insecurity, different universities take different approaches:

- Algoma U has a food pantry with refrigerators and admin regularly seeks donations of food and money for this pantry. See it here: <https://algonau.ca/students/clubs-associations/student-union/the-food-pantry/>
- At another university, students in the faculty build a pantry, faculty and staff keep it stocked. There is a spot for students to request items. There are food shelves, hygiene products and school supplies. Other things as needed, mitts, sunscreen, hats.

Regarding sustainability, different universities have different concerns and the following were highlighted: need to transform universities; too many empty offices; urban farming; guerilla gardening in every green space.

Challenges with public transit were common across many of Ontario's universities.

Regarding Mental health, a focus on comprehensive student wellness is important. Mental health is connected to everything we discussed. Students need inexpensive and reliable ways to get to campus in a timely fashion, access to affordable and healthy food, a roof over their head, etc. Each thing can assist in supporting students' mental health.

Morning meeting, February 14, 2024

1. Information Sharing

The group shared some of the challenges that their universities have been discussing at their senate and/or academic councils. These issues varied among the institutions and topics, especially related to the financial crisis in the sector. Universities are doing what they can to minimize cuts, but because Ontario's universities have worked to maintain efficiencies across the sector (e.g., OUAC, Quality Assurance, Library, bulk purchases, etc.), there are not always a lot of options left that would not impact program offerings and student services. The changes to International student access to Canadian institutions introduced by the federal government was an unexpected curve ball that has many universities concerned. Many universities have had changes among their senior leadership teams and there are challenges in finding new people. Some universities noted that there was a high rate of people on sick leave and many suspect that it is due to burnout. Smaller universities face different challenges than the larger ones. Some indicated that they were asked to make more cuts than were sustainable if their programs were to continue and were told that they would need to use more sessional instructors to teach core courses. One university noted a move from providing mental health counsellors to finding a prevention approach.

2. COU President's Report (Steve Orsini)

- The news about restrictions on international students was another curve ball. Although universities have not contributed significantly to the problem, we will be impacted. COU is advocating for 35% of the international student allotments, but they fear it will end up being less. There were other possible tools the federal government could have used, such as requiring designated institutions to have an accountability agreement with their agents. Ontario universities have more control over applicants because applications go through OUAC. Colleges and private institutions don't have an accountability process and there are some 12,000 agents (and AI) who are flooding the market with bad quality applicants. The COU is arguing that diversity drives innovation, so we want to make sure that the provincial government does not have control over the programs open to international students. A problem over the years has been that government funding has been decreasing while government controls over universities have been increasing. The fair allocation for the international student cap proposal is now live on the Ontario Universities website and has been shared on social. You can find the proposal here: <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/report/ontario-universities-proposal-for-a-fair-allocation-of-theinternational-student-cap/>

- Blue Ribbon Panel: Any additional funding will be great but won't be enough and the government won't do anything that will increase costs to people. COU is doing some outreach with media, etc., telling the story of how the lack of funding to universities impacts students. University student service costs keep going up. Student services are vital for students, but they put pressure on universities. The repeal of Bill 124 added to costs that universities must budget for. They will have to draw on reserves, but they have to slow the decline; if the government comes in with funds, they can stabilize the system. Anything they can put into student services like mental health, will help. Universities have very good track rate at employment after graduation and COU continues to press for a government response. One thing to be aware of is that when universities run deficits it does not hit the government accounting books, while hospitals, colleges and public school deficits do impact the provincial books.

3. COU Internal Updates

Working Group on International Education Recommendations (Marny Scully)

4. Discussion on Future Topics

The meeting ended with a discussion on the topics that will be the focus for upcoming meetings.

A group of students in a lecture hall or meeting room, many holding up white cards or papers. The room features wooden desks, laptops, and a large coat of arms on the wall. The acronym 'OUSA' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif font across the center of the image.

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance



OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

- A student-driven collaboration of student governments that develops public policy solutions and advocates to the provincial government
- We stand for the affordability, accessibility, quality, and accountability of post-secondary education in Ontario

OUSAA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Core Activities

- Conduct research on a number of issues
- Develop informed, substantive policy papers
- Lobby the government to enact these changes
- Represent the student perspective throughout the sector

OUASA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Policy Library

- Addressing Racism & Religious Discrimination
- Indigenous Students
- Accountability & System Vision
- Student Mobility & Credit Transfer
- Tuition
- Student Entrepreneurship, Employment, & Employability
- Two Spirit & LGBTQ+ Students
- Student Accessibility and Disability Inclusion
- Rural & Northern Students
- Gender-based & Sexual Violence Prevention & Response
- Environmental Sustainability
- Student Health & Wellness
- Mature Students
- Teaching & Assessment
- Technology Enabled Learning
- Student Financial Aid
- Ancillary & Incidental Fees
- Student Association Autonomy
- International Students and International Education
- A Comprehensive Access Strategy
- Responding to COVID-19
- Housing, Transit, & Community Development

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Other Activities

- Stay connected in the broader sector by writing op-eds, maintaining a blog, and engaging with traditional and social media
- Engage students and the broader public through campaigns on student issues
- Conduct conferences to engage and educate students

OUS*structure*

STUDENTS



GENERAL ASSEMBLY



STEERING COMMITTEE



EXECUTIVE



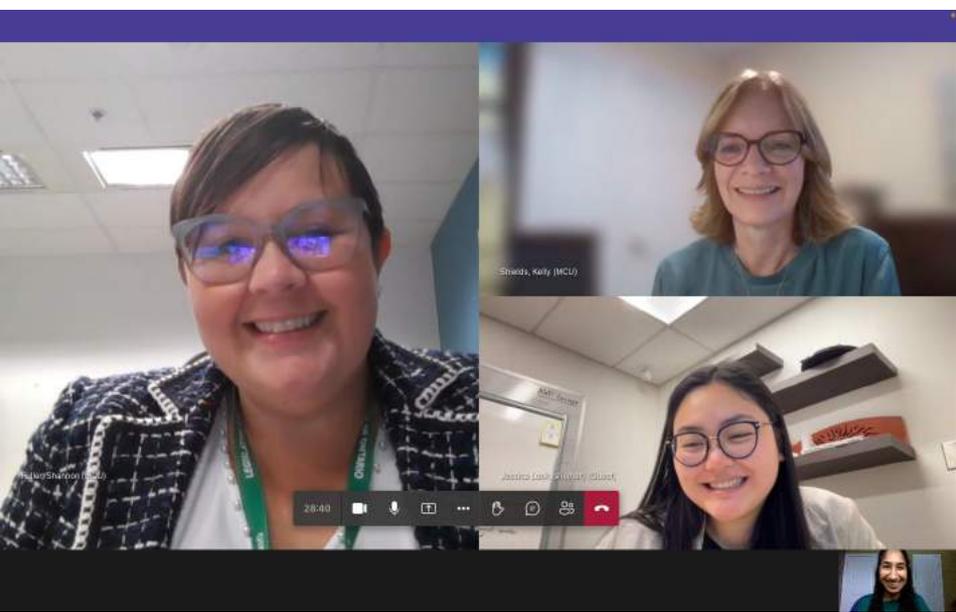
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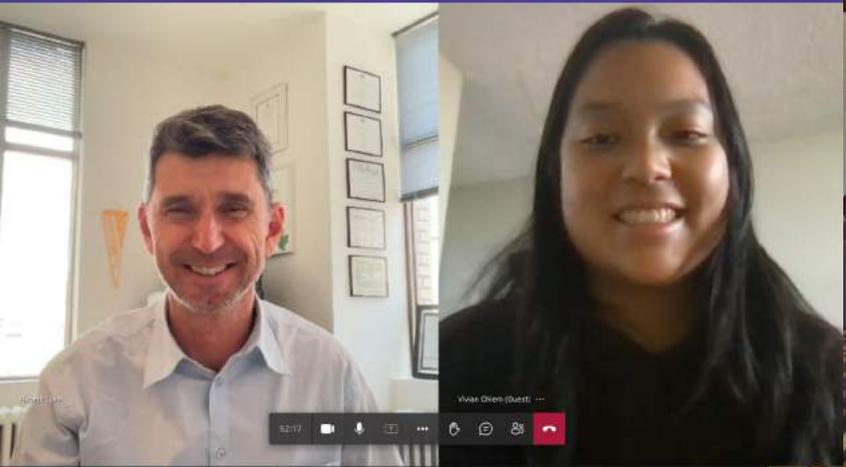




OUASA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance





milestones

2016

\$365 million of tax credits repurposed into grants for low-income students (The New OSAP)

Links created on OUAC and info websites leading to each university's accessibility service for students with disabilities

2017

- \$190 million for experiential learning
- \$9 million for more frontline mental health care workers on campus & \$73 million for student psychotherapy
- \$10,000 increase in OSAP repayment threshold
- \$1 million invested in Ontario's Open Textbook Library
- Reduction in the parental and spousal contribution expectations for applicants to the OSAP program

2018

- Release of the International Student Strategy
- Commitments from all political parties on the need for mental health investments (saw commitments from all political parties on the need for mental health investments, with \$1.9 billion allocated towards mental health)
- First-ever provincial-wide survey on campus sexual violence conducted by the provincial government

2021

- Amendments to Ontario Regulation 131/16 to make post-secondary sexual violence policies more trauma-informed, survivor-centric, and evidence-based.
- Additional \$7M for post-secondary mental health, allocated from gov't funding pool for broader provincial mental health, \$2.39M of which put toward expanding mental health services and increasing access for Black, Indigenous and Francophone students

2020

- COVID-19 student support package, which included, the implementation of the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), Expansion of the Canada Student Grants and Loan Program, and a \$75 million increase in distinctions-based support for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis post-secondary students.
- Six-month interest-free moratorium on Canada Student Loans in response to COVID-19
- \$19.25M for PSE mental health supports for 2020-2021 year, with funding to support campus service providers, develop partnerships, and increase access

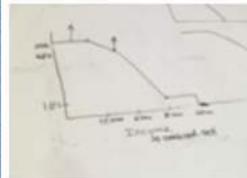
2019

- Fees funding student transit passes declared mandatory for implementation of Student Choice Initiative
- Doubled funding for the Women's Campus Safety Grant to support gender-based violence prevention and response on campuses

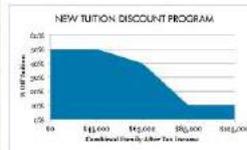
ore? Visit us online at www.ousa.ca.



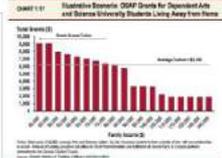
Today, I was pleased to announce proposed amendments to sexual violence policies at college and university campuses. These changes seek to ensure campuses provide a safe and respectful learning environment and to reduce the stigmas and fears survivors have when reporting a case.



OUA Brainstorm, August 2015



OUA Policy, November 2015



Ontario Budget, April 2016

AVERAGE \$ OF GOVERNMENT GRANTS
2015: \$2,272
2017: \$3,957



Before we get into our priorities...

Questions?

Advocacy Priorities

- Decided by our Board of Directors at the beginning of every governing year
- 2023-24
 - Housing and Transit
 - Mental Health
 - Food Insecurity
 - Sector Sustainability



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Housing and Transit

The provincial government should amend the Standard Form of Lease to require renewed tenancy agreements to include the previous rent amount, the approved provincial increase, the new rental rate, and the period of time a tenant has to make an application to the Landlord Tenant Board should they be concerned about the validity of the increase.

The provincial government should, in collaboration with the federal government, provide funding to build the VIA High-Frequency Rail project along the Toronto-Québec City corridor, as well as develop a concrete plan to build High-Frequency Rail along the Toronto-Windsor corridor.



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Housing and Transit (cont'd)

The Ministry of Transportation should work with students and others in the disability community to identify and respond to gaps in Part V: Transportation Standards in Ontario Regulation 191/11 of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* that fail to address the needs of students with disabilities accessing public transit.

The provincial government should re-establish the Ontario Mortgage and Housing Corporation with a provision to allow the OMHC to lend to non-profit housing corporations and post-secondary institutions for an amount equal to the total lending value of a proposed housing project.



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Mental Health

The provincial government should develop a series of best practices that support post-secondary institutions in partnering with local healthcare providers to provide acute and long-term treatment, psychiatric treatment, counselling, health promotion, and preventative action on campus; and provide directives to triage students appropriately.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide assistance and continuous funding, under the Mental Health Worker Grant, to post-secondary institutions to recruit and hire diverse front-line campus-based mental health workers such as staff who identifies as BIPOC, and/or 2SLGBTQIA+.

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that all institution-based mental health care providers receive training on providing accessible, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant counselling and referrals to diverse populations.

Food Insecurity

The provincial government should create a food sustainability certificate for student-led food banks to highlight resources and cost-effective strategies.

The provincial government should establish a grant that student-run food banks can use to maintain the infrastructure required to provide nutritious and culturally relevant food options and food options that meet the requirements of various dietary restrictions (e.g., fridges and freezers).



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Sector Sustainability

The provincial government should increase operating grants until students are contributing at a maximum of one-third of universities' total operating budget, in order to reduce the burden placed on universities to generate revenue through high international tuition fees.

To ensure tuition rates are predictable for international students, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should regulate international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of 5% per year, and in-cohort increases at a maximum of 3% per year.

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

QUESTIONS?

ALMA MATER SOCIETY OF QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
BROCK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' UNION
WATERLOO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION
LAURENTIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' GENERAL ASSOCIATION
MCMASTER STUDENTS UNION
TRENT DURHAM STUDENT ASSOCIATION
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COUNCIL AT WESTERN UNIVERSITY
WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS UNION
ONTARIO TECH STUDENT UNION

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Food Insecurity

Physical health constitutes a fundamental human right and is crucial for students to succeed at post-secondary institutions. Despite this, the persistent challenge of ensuring access to high-quality, nutritious, affordable, culturally-safe, and diverse campus food options remains a pressing issue for students across Ontario. It is crucial that the provincial government steps in to provide the necessary support to ensure that students' nutritional needs are met, and they can actively engage in their post-secondary education.

Summary Food insecurity is a pressing issue affecting more than half of all Canadian university students.¹ Access to quality, nutritious, affordable, and diverse food options continues to be a challenge for students due to high tuition and the concurrent rise in rental costs and inflation.² The substantial cost of attending post-secondary education leaves students with a scant or even non-existent budget for food. The results from OUSA's survey showed that 20.5% of students reduced their spending on food in order to pay for rent.³ As a result, the dependency on food banks in Ontario has increased by 42% in the past three years,⁴ increasing by a staggering 220% for students in some areas such as Waterloo in 2023.⁵ Therefore, affordable, nutritious, and diverse options are becoming a growing necessity for our institutions to invest in. By increasing support and funding for on-campus food banks, the provincial government can address the challenge of food insecurity and contribute to the overall health of post-secondary students.

Recommendation

The provincial government should create a food sustainability certificate for student-led food banks to highlight resources and cost-effective strategies.

Recommendation

The provincial government should establish a grant that student-run food banks can use to maintain the infrastructure required to provide nutritious and culturally relevant food options and food options that meet the requirements of various dietary restrictions (e.g., fridges and freezers).

While food insecurity affects a large portion of people, recent studies suggest that post-secondary students experience food insecurity at a higher rate than the general population.⁶ More than half of university students in Canada struggle with food insecurity, a challenge more prevalent among marginalized populations such as international and Indigenous students, who face additional financial and cultural barriers.⁷ Several factors, including the increasing cost of tuition, clawbacks to OSAP funding, inflation, and a challenging labour market contribute to food insecurity.⁸ Consequently, the dependency on student-run food banks has significantly increased; for instance, the reliance on food banks rose by 220% from 2022 to 2023 in areas such as Waterloo.⁹

Food insecurity not only impacts the physical health of students but also leads to dietary compromises, poor mental health, overall health decline, and reduced academic achievement.¹⁰ Therefore, it is crucial for the provincial government to establish a food sustainability certificate for student-led food banks, highlighting resources and cost-effective strategies. This may include information on improving time management, identifying cost-effective food options, and employing couponing strategies or methods to save money weekly which students may be unaware of. Moreover, with the population becoming more diverse, there is a growing need to provide culturally appropriate foods, such as halal and kosher options. Consequently, a grant should be developed for student-run food banks to maintain the necessary infrastructure, such as fridges and freezers, to offer nutritious and culturally relevant food options that cater to various dietary restrictions among their student populations.

¹Accessibility and Affordability: The Status of Student Food Insecurity in Canada — The Sandbox Project. The Sandbox Project. Last modified June 8, 2022. <https://sandboxproject.ca/the-ycrh-blog/2022/5/31/accessibility-and-affordability-the-status-of-student-food-insecurity-in-canada>.

²Eat, Think, Vote-Student Food Insecurity. Food Secure Canada, 2019. <https://www.eatthinkvote.ca/sites/www.eatthinkvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Back-grounder-Student-Food-insecurity-ENG-.pdf>.

Unpublished data from 2022 OUSS

⁴Feed Ontario. Hunger Report- The Deepening Cracks in Ontario's Economic Foundation. 2022. <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Hunger-Report-2022-Final.pdf>.

⁵Robert Williams Record Reporter. "Students Accessing Food Banks Increase by 220% in October." The Record. Last modified November 13, 2023. https://www.therecord.com/news/waterloo-region/students-accessing-food-banks-increase-by-220-in-october/article_ec59e31c-e9b8-5d00-922c-f9753a261a32.html.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid; Hanbazaza M, Kebbe M, Perez A, Ball G, Farmer AP, Maximova K, et al. Food insecurity among international post-secondary students studying on a canadian campus: a qualitative description study. Canadian Journal of Higher Education. 2021;51(2): 33-45; Frank L. "Hungry for an education": prevalence and outcomes of food insecurity among students at a primarily undergraduate university in rural Nova Scotia. Canadian Journal of Higher Education. 2018;48(2):109-29.

⁸Ibid

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Nayantara Hattangadi, Ellen Vogel, Linda J. Carroll, and Pierre Côté, "Everybody I know Is Always Hungry...But Nobody Asks Why": University Students, Food Insecurity and Mental Health," Sustainability 11, no. 6 (2019): 1571, doi:10.3390/su11061571.

Housing and Transit

Access to quality, affordable housing and reliable transportation is essential to a positive post-secondary education experience. Students entering new municipalities to pursue post-secondary education should have access to reliable transportation and be free from the worry of discriminatory and exploitative rental practices. However, on average, Canadian students pay 25% more than non-student renters, and their housing options are often poorly maintained.¹ In addition to varying housing quality, students also experience unpredictable public transit service. Unreliable public transit negatively impacts students' campus engagement and academic performance. Ensuring students' housing and transit needs are met is essential to their academic and long-term success.

Recommendation

The provincial government should amend the Standard Form of Lease to require renewed tenancy agreements to include the previous rent amount, the approved provincial increase, the new rental rate, and the period of time a tenant has to make an application to the Landlord Tenant Board should they be concerned about the validity of the increase.

Currently, the onus is on prospective tenants to ensure landlords adhere to provincially set rental property guidelines. Due to the competitive nature of near-campus rental markets, many student renters lack adequate time to verify that the listed rent complies with provincial standards. In addition, as first-time renters, students are often more susceptible to rental exploitation. Canadian students pay 25% more than the average renter for their accommodations due to competition and lack of landlord transparency. By including previous rental rates, the approved provincial increase and the window of inquiry in the Standard Form of Lease, renters, especially vulnerable ones such as students, are given protection from above-guideline rental rates.

Recommendation

The provincial government should, in collaboration with the federal government, provide funding to build the VIA High-Frequency Rail project along the Toronto-Québec City corridor, as well as develop a concrete plan to build High-Frequency Rail along the Toronto-Windsor corridor.

Constructing high-speed rail in the Toronto-Windsor and the Toronto-Québec corridor would improve post-secondary education access for students across the province. These corridors connect multiple major municipalities across southwestern and eastern Ontario, many of which are home to post-secondary institutions. Studies show that 51% of students choose post-secondary institutions based on commute times and accessibility.² High-speed rail corridors would significantly reduce travel times between municipalities, lowering student dependence on personal motor vehicles. By creating rapid, reliable, and affordable transit options that connect these cities, students under financial and distance constraints can access more educational opportunities across the province without leaving their home municipalities.

¹Chong, Joshua. "Students Are Now Paying 25% More for Housing than the Average Canadian Renter — and That's Pushing Rents up." Thestar.Com, September 12, 2022. <https://www.thestar.com/business/2022/09/12/students-are-paying-25-per-cent-more-for-housing-than-the-average-canadian-renter-report-finds.html>.

²Mitra, R., Habib, K. N., Siemietycki, M., Keil, R. and Bowes, J. (2020) StudentMoveTO - From Insight to Action on Transportation for Post-Secondary Students in the GTHA: 2019 Transportation Survey Findings. Web portal: www.StudentMoveTO.ca

Recommendation

The Ministry of Transportation should work with students and others in the disability community to identify and respond to gaps in Part V: Transportation Standards in Ontario Regulation 191/11 of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act that fail to address the needs of students with disabilities accessing public transit.

Public transit should serve as an accessible transit option for all students to reach their post-secondary institutions. However, many students with disabilities face barriers to accessing public transportation. 56% of students with mobility impairments reported being discouraged from coming to campus because of commute times compared to 40% of students without mobility impairments³. Despite the Ontario Human Rights Code asserting all individuals should have equal access to education regardless of their ability status, students with disabilities still face difficulties accessing post-secondary education due to public infrastructure barriers. Students with disabilities often have issues accessing transportation, such as buses, due to overcrowding, poor inclement weather planning, and limited access to Wheel Transit services. Through student consultation, the provincial government can improve the gaps in Part V: Transportation Standards in Ontario Regulation 191/11 of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act that fail to address the needs of students with disabilities accessing public transit. This would improve access for post-secondary students with disabilities and allow them to meaningfully engage in their post-secondary education.

Recommendation

The provincial government should re-establish the Ontario Mortgage and Housing Corporation with a provision to allow the OMHC to lend to non-profit housing corporations and post-secondary institutions for an amount equal to the total lending value of a proposed housing project.

Students across the province experience difficulty securing housing during their post-secondary education. Many students struggle to find affordable housing in their institutions' municipalities in competitive real estate markets. A viable alternative to market housing for students is purpose-built student accommodations (PBSA). However, PBSA stock is extremely limited in Ontario. Nationally, Canada only has 120,000 student beds on campuses⁴ and 40,000 purpose-built off-campus housing despite over 1.4 million students.⁵ Although the Greater Waterloo Area has the largest concentration of purpose-built student accommodations with 20,000 off-campus PBSA, other university towns lack this infrastructure.⁶ To increase the amount of PBSA available to students, universities need support for the construction of housing stock. The provincial government can assist in PBSA stock growth by re-establishing the Ontario Mortgage and Housing Corporation that post-secondary institutions could pull from towards student housing projects, for an amount equal to the total lending value of a proposed housing project. By subsidizing the construction of student housing, the provincial government would bolster growth in the post-secondary sector, as institutions that currently lack the capital funding and investment to execute projects of this scale could then guarantee greater housing stock for their growing student bodies.

³Jordan Aharoni, Ron Buliung, and Raktim Mitra, "University and College Travel for Students with Mobility Impairment(s) in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, Canada," Findings, January 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.32866/001c.18630>.

⁴University Affairs, "Solving the Student Housing Crisis – University Affairs," March 9, 2022, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/solving-the-student-housing-crisis/>.

⁵Facts and Stats – Universities Canada, "Universities Canada," July 12, 2023, <https://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/>.

⁶University Affairs, "Solving the Student Housing Crisis – University Affairs," March 9, 2022, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/solving-the-student-housing-crisis/>.

Sector Sustainability

All willing and eligible students should be able to pursue post-secondary education. However, the shift from publicly funded to publicly assisted post-secondary institutions in Ontario jeopardizes this reality for some students. Provincial operating grants only account for 31.2% of institutional budgets, while student contributions make up 67%.¹ This system unfairly burdens students, especially international students, with funding the quality of post-secondary education. Ontario has the lowest expenditure on post-secondary education nationally,² and continuing this trend only serves as a detriment to the quality and sustainability of post-secondary education provincially.

Recommendation

The provincial government should increase operating grants until students are contributing at a maximum of one-third of universities' total operating budget, in order to reduce the burden placed on universities to generate revenue through high international tuition fees.

Provincial operating grants account for 31% of post-secondary institutions operating budgets, and student contributions account for 67%. This ratio overburdens students, primarily international students, to contribute to institutional budgets. As provincial funding has decreased, the necessity to recruit international students has increased, and their tuition has become an essential revenue stream for institutions. Despite recommendations by the Blue Ribbon Panel to increase per-student funding by 10% and 2% annually thereafter, this does not adequately address the fact that Ontario's contributions only amount to 57% of the Canadian average.³ Overreliance on international students also fails to account for immigration trends, geopolitical events that affect diplomatic relations, or the continuous willingness of students to pay disproportionately high fees. By increasing operating grants and lowering student contributions, the provincial government will align itself with the recommendations of sector experts, improve the funding gap and ensure the sustainability of post-secondary education in Ontario.

Recommendation

To ensure tuition rates are predictable for international students, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should regulate international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of 5% per year, and in-cohort increases at a maximum of 3% per year.

International students face disproportionately high tuition costs compared to their domestic counterparts. On average international students pay five times more than Ontarian students, at \$45,252 and \$9,001, respectively.⁴ In addition to high costs, international student tuition is unregulated, and students are subjected to unpredictable increases annually. The lack of regulation hinders international students' ability to adequately prepare for the financial undertaking of an undergraduate degree in Ontario, creating a significant barrier to persistence for international students. By regulating international tuition for incoming students at a maximum of 5% per year and in-cohort increases at 3% per year, the provincial government will maintain Ontario's position as a viable education option for students across the world.

¹Council of Ontario Finance Officers, "Financial Report of Ontario Universities 2021-22 Highlights" (COFO, March 2023).

²"2. Canada and the Provinces," CAUT, n.d., <https://www.caut.ca/resources/almanac/2-canada-provinces>.

³Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability, "Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector", (Government of Ontario, November 2023)

⁴Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, "The Daily – Tuition Fees for Degree Programs, 2022/2023," September 7, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220907/dq220907b-eng.htm>.

Student Mental Health

Post-secondary students continue to face unique mental health challenges stemming from a variety of factors, including financial insecurity, academic pressure, and post-graduation career prospects. Moreover, as mental health concerns are rising, existing care providers are struggling to meet the increasing demand for services, and therefore, the provincial government must work collaboratively to ensure that students are well-supported and are given the adequate, timely, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate care they need to succeed in their post-secondary education.

Summary Student mental health concerns are on the rise, with a staggering three-quarters of post-secondary students experiencing negative mental health during their studies¹. The number of students diagnosed with mental health conditions doubled from 2012 to 2022², with disproportionate impacts on marginalized students such as Two-Spirit, LGBTQIA+, and BIPOC individuals³. While mental health issues have increased, existing care providers have not been able to meet this growing demand.⁴ For instance, the average wait time for counselling and therapy is 67 days and for intensive treatment, the average is 92 days.⁵ Moreover, students have to wait up to two weeks before they get their first on-campus appointment.⁶ In addition, there are other challenges, including a lack of diversity among providers, extended wait times, and confusion regarding service delivery for students. Therefore, a collaborative approach is necessary, coupled with increasing the diversity of healthcare workers and adopting a trauma-informed and culturally relevant approach.

Recommendation

The provincial government should develop a series of best practices that support post-secondary institutions in partnering with local healthcare providers to provide acute and long-term treatment, psychiatric treatment, counselling, health promotion, and preventative action on campus; and provide directives to triage students appropriately.

Over the past several years, the increase in mental health issues among students has put pressure on post-secondary institutions to move beyond their academic role to providing ongoing mental health treatment. Not only do institutions lack the funding and resources, but also do not have the expertise to treat the myriad issues that students experience.⁷ Acute and long-term support of this nature rightfully falls within the mandate of healthcare providers and community agencies. A distinction must be made between the triage role of post-secondary institutions to direct students with serious or complex needs to appropriate care, and the acute and long-term service provision role of health and community service agencies. Clear boundaries for each institution, coupled with an integrated approach to service delivery, mean that students will obtain faster access to mental health and social services.

¹Linden, Brooke, Heather Stuart, and Amy Ecclestone. "Trends in Post-Secondary Student Stress: A Pan-Canadian Study." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 68, no. 7 (2022), 521-530. doi:10.1177/07067437221111365.

²Statistics Canada. "Study: Mental Disorders and Access to Mental Health Care." Statistics Canada: Canada's National Statistical Agency / Statistique Canada : Organisme Statistique National Du Canada. Last modified September 22, 2023. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230922/dq230922b-eng.htm>.

³Mortier P, Cuijpers P, Kiekens G, et al. The prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviours among college students: a meta-analysis. *Psychol Med*. 2018;48(4):554-565. doi:10.1017/s0033291717002215.

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⁶Unpublished data from OUSA's 2022 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey.

⁷Council of Ontario Universities. *In It Together—Taking Action on Student Mental Health*. 2017. <https://cou.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/In-It-Together-PSE-Mental-Health-Action-Plan.pdf>.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should provide assistance and continuous funding, under the Mental Health Worker Grant, to post-secondary institutions to recruit and hire diverse front-line campus-based mental health workers such as staff who identifies as BIPOC, and/or 2SLGBTQIA+.

Cultural and social identities have implications for mental health practice, ranging from the ways that people view health and illness, to treatment-seeking patterns, coping mechanisms, and supports.⁸ Individuals feel more at ease and understood in their interactions with mental health care workers who share common identities and lived experiences.⁹ As the student population becomes increasingly diverse in Ontario, it is essential that front-line campus-based mental health workers also reflect the diversity and identities of the students. Currently, there is an underrepresentation of mental health workers from diverse backgrounds.¹⁰ Moreover, marginalized post-secondary students such as Indigenous, international, Two-Spirit, and LGBTQIA+, are disproportionately affected by poor mental health and negative experiences with care providers. Therefore, deliberate efforts are needed to hire diverse mental health workers.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that all institution-based mental health care providers receive training on providing accessible, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant counselling and referrals to diverse populations.

Culturally relevant and trauma-informed counselling is essential for addressing the diverse mental health needs of individuals, as it creates a more personalized, safe, inclusive, and empathetic environment.¹² This is especially crucial when providing care for marginalized groups such as Black, Indigenous, Two-Spirit, LGBTQIA+, and international students. While institution-based mental health care providers are usually the first point of contact for student needs, they are currently not mandated to undergo essential training modalities. Therefore, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities should mandate that all institution-based mental health care providers receive training in providing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) based, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant counselling as well as referrals to diverse populations. Mental health care providers and staff should be required to take this training regularly as changes are made in their respective fields, new best practices are developed, and additional competencies are required.

⁸Gopalkrishnan, Narayan. "Cultural Diversity and Mental Health: Considerations for Policy and Practice." *Frontiers in Public Health* 6 (2018). doi:10.3389/fpubh.2018.00179.

⁹Ibid

¹⁰Kurzawa, J., Danseco, E., Lucente, G., Huang, C., Sundar, P., & Allen-Valley, A. (2022). Advancing racial equity, diversity, and inclusion in Ontario's child and youth mental health sector: Perspectives of agency leaders. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie canadienne*, 63(4), 500–510. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000336>

¹¹Ibid

¹²Ibid