Affordability, Quality and Well-Being for Students

Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association Pre-Budget Submission 2020

Importance of Post-Secondary Education

Public investment in education has long been a tradition of promoting post-secondary attainment, which both advances research, but also educates students to meet the needs of an evolving workforce. In a 20 year longitudinal study, university graduates saw a median earnings premium of approximately $600,000 over their first 20 years of work compared to those with only a high school diploma[1]. These graduates provide highly skilled labour to companies, start their own, provide increased income tax revenue. These contributions are not limited to after graduation either; even while at university, Waterloo co-operative education students contribute 410 million dollars to Ontario's GDP through participation in the co-op program[2].

For the post-secondary educational system to continue to work and work equitably, quality of education needs to be maintained and improved, students need to be in a state of well-being both physically and mentally, and barriers need to be disassembled for those with fewer means and other marginalized groups. The following recommendations outline some ways to work toward these broad goals.

Quality

Recommendation 1: Invest in the Career Ready Fund to support development of new skill-building, research and international opportunities for Ontario's students.

Investment in the Career Ready Fund has led to thousands of new experiential education opportunities[3], and has seen development of new programs to help connect students with employers across Ontario. This recommendation aligns with some of the valuable recommendations found in the *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow* report[4]. The size of investment would depend on what streams and goals are pursued, however, the initial investment in 2017 was 68 million dollars over three years.

Continuation or expansion of this fund could further improve accessibility to these opportunities, and could establish new funding streams that support strategic initiatives for helping specific marginalized groups, industry types, or skillsets.

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[1] Ostrovsky & Frenette (2014). The Cumulative Earnings of Postsecondary Graduates Over 20 Years. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2014040-eng.pdf
[2] Deloitte Canada (2019). University of Waterloo Economic Impact Assessment 2019. https://uwaterloo.ca/about/sites/ca.about/files/uploads/files/economic-impact-report-2019-accessible.pdf
[3] Riipen. Career Ready Fund & Riipen Delivering Thousands of WIL Experiences for Ontario Students. https://riipen.com/2019/01/17/career-ready-fund/
[4] Conway et al (2015). Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility. https://www.ontario.ca/page/building-workforce-tomorrow-shared-responsibility

An area that the last iteration of the Career Ready Fund did not address was increasing the global appeal and experiences of Ontario's graduates. Competition in a global economy often requires international competencies and experiences. An expansion of the Career Ready Fund through a dedicated funding stream would target the expansion of international capacity, or directly incentivize international experiences for students. An area for partnership and synergy with Global Affairs Canada's new internationalization strategy, giving Ontario's students an additional leg up.

Another potential Career Ready Stream should be established to support student entrepreneurial activity, building capacity to facilitate students access to university incubators, specialized training for entrepreneurship, connections to mentorship, connections to venture capital, and eventual support for early intellectual property and commercialization costs.

Finally, while the government is currently supporting entrepreneurship and work-integrated learning programs, it is important that research is prioritized to enable students to develop a distinct skillset, and give Ontario's companies access to new-undergraduate employees with research expertise. A potential way to increase research skills would be to create a funding stream for partnerships between Ontario companies and universities to provide undergraduates with private research placements. While the federal government provides investments for public research, Ontario has the opportunity to lead partnering students and companies to fight Canada's low investment in research & development[5], improving technological competitiveness of its companies, and the job competitiveness and skills of its students.

In summary, this recommendation asks for Ontario to invest in the skills of its university graduates by giving universities and colleges tools to build capacity to provide experiences to their students, preparing them to succeed in the private sector through work experience, in a global economy through international experiences, in starting their own companies through entrepreneurial experiences, and in research and development by partnering with companies to offer undergraduate research experiences.

Recommendation 2: Expand capacity of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to conduct research on post-secondary education.

The quality of Ontario's post-secondary system is often difficult to assess. This can run up against a desire for data-driven decision making and policy. The research that HEQCO conducts is independent and practical, and both provides formative feedback for the sector on how it can improve its practices, as well as assessment of system performance. As HEQCO's current multi-year research plan ends, providing a higher base level of funding can improve the quantity of research produced by HEQCO to inform Ontario's post-secondary policy decisions. As research is a scaleable expense, the level of spending should be based on how much additional capacity the province wishes to establish, but for context, the current business plan calls for 5 million dollars per year. WUSA encourages the province to collaborate with HEQCO's president and board to establish a reasonable expanded funding level as HEQCO's next research plan is finalized with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities.

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[5] Semeniuk (2018). Canada struggling to capitalize on research and development sector. The Globe and Mail. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-struggling-to-capitalize-on-research-and-development-sector/

Well-being

Recommendation 3: Extend the Mental Health Services Grant.

The current Mental Health Services Grant, which expires this year, provides funding to universities and colleges to expand their mental health capabilities. At a time when many university students are still experiencing multi-week waiting periods for non-crisis counselling, a lapse of this grant will only compound the problem. WUSA recommends that the grant be continued at at least its current levels of $6 million dollars a year, and further expanded in line with the government's goal of expanding mental health spending in Ontario. This represents one priority expenditure among many others found in the multi-stakeholder *In It Together* report on mental healthcare for students in Ontario. All students deserve to be healthy, and all of society benefits when mental health is a priority.

Recommendation 4: Expand the purview and funding for the Women's Campus Safety Grant.

Sexual violence is a major obstacle to both physical and mental well-being on Ontario's campuses. The current Women's Campus Safety Grant (WCSG) serves as an opportunity for post-secondary institutions to apply for small amounts of infrastructure funding which can be used for projects that can improve environmental design and training to prevent sexual violence. However, with the advent of sexual violence training programs and a greater desire to try different approaches to reducing sexual violence and supporting survivors. Under the leadership of then Minister of Training Colleges and Universities Fullerton, the grant was temporarily expanded from 3 million dollars to 6 million dollars.

WUSA asks the government to both expand the scope of the program to include program pilots, digital initiatives, survivor support, and other types of projects, as well as to expand the resources in the program from the current 3 million dollar baseline to either meet or exceed the 6 million dollar investment made in 2018-2019 to support the expanded scope. WUSA also points towards the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's (OUSA) recent advocacy work, including a proposed change for the institutional terms of reference for the committees that assess proposals.

Affordability

Recommendation 5: Invest in Open Educational Resources

Textbook costs are one of the largest costs for students in Ontario. While costs of tuition, rent, and food are not easy to reduce through government action, the model of investment in free textbooks that British Columbia has adopted has led to upwards of a six-fold return from an initial government investment of approximately 2 million dollars between 2012 and 2014. This has led to estimated student savings of 12 million dollars over the first seven years of the program, and has led British Columbia to make a second round of investment[6].

Ontario should similarly invest in development of textbooks in high-demand courses where they are currently not available, in partnership with eCampus Ontario.
Students who have access to OERs have fewer textbook costs, which lowers the financial barriers to accessing post-secondary education and also reduces the amount of debt students accumulate while studying. With more savings and less debt, graduates are able to reach life milestones and contribute to local economies, setting them up for future success.

Recommendation 6: Gradual Restoration of the OSAP transformation

The changes to OSAP have reduced availability of both loans and grants for many students. The expansion of OSAP in 2017 vastly reduced the financial barriers for students to access post-secondary, and was funded in part by repurposing of tax credits. These changes vastly increased the applications and acceptances to universities[7], including from marginalized groups such as Indigenous students[8], even as the estimated pool of application aged students decreased from 2016 before the announcement through the 2017, 2018 and 2019 application years before the cuts that were announced had a chance to affect[9].

While these cuts were a significant policy choice in light of an increased focus on deficit reduction, as Ontario's deficit-to-GDP and debt-to-GDP ratio continue to improve, the province should consider a gradual return to its higher level of support. The stated risk to the sustainability of the program that was the justification of the rollback would decrease as provincial deficits decrease. Early efforts to make gradual adjustments should focus on increasing grant levels for the lowest income brackets back to former levels, and increasing loan availability to all students to address issues of students not having enough cash-on-hand in the moment to afford to go attend post-secondary education. For the province, this means diversity and accessibility in our institutions, and giving students a chance to start after graduation without unreasonable debt, making it easier for them to find a good job fit for their skills, afford to move to the right job market, or attempt to start their own business.

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[6] Caldwell (2019). $3.26M pledged to OER to enable student savings throughout the province
[7] Per the Ontario Universities Application Centre
[8] Chiose (2017). OSAP applications rise after Ontario streamlines student-aid system. The Globe And Mail. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/osap-applications-rise-after-ontario-streamlines-student-aid-system/article36234322/
[9] Per Ministry of Finance Ontario Population Projections reference scenarios

Recommendation 7: Improve Support to Indigenous Students.

The Indigenous Student Bursary is a program designed to provide support to Indigenous students, recognizing the unique issues that they face. While students are eligible to receive between 1000 and 3500 dollars annually, the Ontario undergraduate Student Alliance notes in its Indigenous Students policy paper that most recipients receive the lower bound of that amount[10]. OUSA estimated that 4200 Indigenous students are eligible for financial aid. If the program was to pay out the full $3500 upper bound to each of these students, it would entail increased spending of approximately 10.5 million dollars per year, or possibly less, depending what proportion of students were already receiving above the minimum.

We ask the province to do more to support Indigenous students in the spirit of truth and reconciliation, to help address intergenerational trauma and inequality, and support long-term prosperity for Indigenous individuals and communities driven by their own self-determination to attend post-secondary education.

Other Investments

We have excluded many recommendations for the sake of brevity and focus; however, WUSA welcomes the opportunity to comment or provide perspective on any other post-secondary education initiative that the Standing Committee may wish to inquire into. We especially welcome those that may overlap with themes that are covered by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, of which we are a member, as we collaborate with other student associations in OUSA's policy formulation process, and remain closely aligned with their recommendations all but some exceptional respects.

[10] Bathish et al. (2017). Indigenous Students. Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ousa/pages/83/attachments/original/1510256571/Indigenous_Students_policy_paper_document.pdf?1510256571