



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
STUDENTS' UNION



Pre-Budget Submission

Ontario's 2022 Budget Consultations

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SUBMITTED BY

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About Us

The University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) is a not-for-profit organization incorporated under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act (CNCA). The UTSU functions autonomously from the University of Toronto, and acts as the primary student government for over 39,000 undergraduate students at the University of Toronto's St. George campus.



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1 - STUDENT FINANCIAL AID:

The affordability and accessibility of post-secondary education has long been a preeminent concern for student unions, and it is unsurprising that under pandemic conditions the urgency has been heightened. The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) is, of course, one of the most powerful levers wielded by the provincial government to alleviate such difficulties, and thus constitutes a central focus of our recommendations here. When adequately endowed, the program is central to tearing down the barriers that low-income, marginalized, and/or vulnerable students face to accessing post-secondary education and thus to bettering themselves and our economy. When starved, it perpetuates and reinforces these same barriers.

Recent efforts by the provincial government have tended towards the latter condition. Students raise three concerns in particular: that funding from OSAP is insufficient to address student needs; that it has become increasingly difficult to attain eligibility despite their obvious need; and that the consequent debts they face constrain their future prospects. All of these concerns have not only been ignored, in fact, it appears that steps have been taken to the effect of heightening their adversity. We have seen an increase in the proportion of loans to grants, the elimination of the Interest-Free grace period, increases in the expected contribution of students and their families, and cuts to spending on student financial aid by \$400 million. These 2019 changes and 2020-2021 reductions in funding met the pandemic to produce a veritable catastrophe for students, one to which the provincial government appears indifferent. This has been felt sorely by students; according to a recent [OUSA survey](#), 33% of students in 2020-21, and 38% in 2019-20, received less assistance, and consequently 47% of students “who were concerned about having enough money to complete their education attributed this to the reduced funding in OSAP they received as compared to previous years.” These issues are especially felt by low-income students, students with disabilities, and racialized students.

The impact of these issues extends into all of the concerns outlined below: students who cannot access educational institutions also lose access to employment, and consequently are deprived of the ability to contribute to our economy; debt, financial well-being, and uncertain future have been consistently identified as causes of student anxiety and the deterioration of their mental health; the reduction of university funding puts pressure on attendant students to compensate, and therefore makes their education even more inaccessible. **Student financial aid, therefore, is not only paramount causally, but presents the most effective and immediate opportunity to ameliorate the situation.**

In regard to student financial aid, our recommendations are as follows:

1.1 - REDUCE STUDENT DEBT

RECOMMENDATION: As the House of Commons sensibly chose to do, the province must immediately reinstate the moratorium on OSAP repayments and interest accruals for the duration of the pandemic - that is, so long as student finances continue to be affected by it.

RECOMMENDATION: Increase the amount of non-repayable OSAP grants relative to loans in order to reduce the strain on students who are already suffering from strained finances.

RECOMMENDATION: The six-month interest-free grace period must be reinstated as a permanent measure.

1.2 - EXPAND ELIGIBILITY

Recent efforts to reduce the efficacy and reach of OSAP have been felt sorely by students; according to a recent OUSA survey, 33% of students in 2020-21, and 38% in 2019-20, received less assistance, and consequently 47% of students “who were concerned about having enough money to complete their education.”¹

RECOMMENDATION: Eliminate the expected financial contributions from parents and spouses so that OSAP loan calculations properly account for students’ financial needs, especially as pandemic conditions have made such an expectation exceedingly unrealistic for many.

RECOMMENDATION: Given the uncertainties consequent to the pandemic, the provincial government must suspend the current OSAP policy to put students in probation for dropping 40% of their courses.

1.3 - INCREASE SUPPORTS:

RECOMMENDATION: Federal investments should not be seen as a substitute for provincial funding, but as additive; any savings generated from the recent clawbacks must be reinvested into OSAP and the \$400 million cut must be undone.

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2- EMPLOYMENT AND WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING:

As is well known, the adverse impacts of the pandemic have been felt unevenly across the population - students and the recently graduated are among those vulnerable groups which have borne the brunt of its shock. Recent years have magnified the precarity of student finances and employment; even under ideal conditions, they are frequently regarded as the most disposable segment of the workforce. They have lost hours, summer jobs, research positions, and have even been dismissed entirely, with grave effects on their savings and future. Graduates are facing a job market that is increasingly competitive and hostile to their entry, despite constituting an integral part of the province's recovery. Students deserve to feel assured that their representatives are looking out for their interests.

This not only adversely affects students' access to future employment, and their school when financial aid is insufficient, it also hurts our economy - when students are unprepared for their futures, the competitiveness of Canada's labour force feels the impact. The more we allow them to slip through the cracks because of the pandemic, the more we allow the province and country to fall behind.

RECOMMENDATION: Invest in programs and employment supports to help students gain work experience during and after their post-secondary studies by providing wage subsidies to businesses hiring co-op students and recent graduates. This not only incentivizes student employment, but it helps support businesses that are struggling to hire additional workers, especially as the province's economic situation continues to deteriorate. The Career Ready Fund and David C. Onley Initiative are fantastic examples of similar programs which require further funding.

3 - UNIVERSITY FUNDING & TUITION:

While the UTSU commends recent changes to the student financial aid framework, including the 10% reduction in domestic tuition and two-year tuition freeze from 2020-2022, there is still considerable progress to be made. Any such efforts are insufficient so long as students continue to constitute such a considerable percentage (60.2 percent) of university operating revenue. Thus, 47 percent of students in a recent [OUSA survey](#) cited tuition as one of the policy initiatives that needed the most improvement. What is needed is for such public institutions to be adequately funded by the public, so that the burden is not offloaded on a demographic already poorly positioned to contribute and exceedingly facing financial strains. The adverse effects of this reliance are disproportionately felt by international students, whose tuition rates continue to increase, even while they pay the highest tuition rates of any province in the country.

RECOMMENDATION: More provincial operating grants are needed so that university tuition can stay low, for both domestic and international students.

RECOMMENDATION: Extend the domestic tuition freeze until 2022-2023, or as long as the pandemic continues, ensuring that grants to universities compensate for the reduced student revenue.

RECOMMENDATION: Provide for limitations in the Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines for international student tuition, similar to those already outlined for domestic students. Otherwise, universities will continue to increase their reliance on international students, who are forced to confront an unpredictable and wildly excessive cost for their education.

4 - MENTAL HEALTH AND THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY:

Post-secondary institutions are struggling in their efforts to provide adequate mental health support for their students. The most recent National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey in 2019 found that [52% of students reported feeling depressed, and 69% experienced anxiety](#). These figures are a significant increase from 2013, where NCHA estimated the prevalence of these health concerns at [37% and 56%](#), respectively. The current pandemic has further exacerbated the mental health crisis at post-secondary institutions, with youth being [more likely](#) to experience mental health concerns compared to other age groups. In addition, substance use and addiction is [highest](#) among those aged 19-24 years old. The province needs to prioritize the provision of gender and culturally-sensitive mental health and addiction resources for youth. Additionally, the province needs to address uncertainties related to learning and the pandemic.

4.1 - MENTAL HEALTH

RECOMMENDATION: Building on the Province's commitment to providing digital analytics and interoperability support for care providers under the *Core Services Framework*, **invest in public-facing digital mental health services and resources.**

RECOMMENDATION: Increase funding for campus-based mental health services and supports, including peer-to-peer programming and early intervention support.

RECOMMENDATION: Support the long-term funding of the Center for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, an organization that helps post-secondary institutions in their commitment to student mental health and well-being.

4.2 - PANDEMIC RECOVERY

RECOMMENDATION: Increase funding for institutions to support purchases of rapid antigen tests on behalf of students who request them

RECOMMENDATION: Support institutions looking to increase the capability of learning spaces to support the facilitation of hybrid learning

5 - TRANSIT:

Public Transit is an integral service to students, especially commuters whose post-secondary education is in large part facilitated by it. Recent limitations on service, compounded by financial difficulties and constraints on mobility, have had a considerable impact on the welfare of students, one which the province is well-positioned to mitigate. According to a [2019 survey](#) of over 18, 000 post-secondary students in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, 31% of students felt that their commute was a barrier to their academic success and 48% noted barriers to their co-curricular experience and campus involvement as a result of transportation costs and experiences. Almost [two-thirds](#) of students use public transit as their primary means of commuting, with those who reside outside of Toronto incurring increased transportation costs. As housing becomes increasingly unaffordable, students are pushed further from the downtown core, and thus the gravity of affordable transit is heightened. The province must commit to funding student-oriented transportation initiatives and transit infrastructure projects.

RECOMMENDATION: Reinstate grants to support the *Metrolinx Discounted Double Fare Program* or implement other strategies to integrate regional transit fares to help address regional [inequities](#) in transportation costs

RECOMMENDATION: Commit to increasing funding in Toronto Transit to support a continued fare freeze and prevent further service reductions as a result of pandemic-related [financial and ridership impacts](#)

RECOMMENDATION: Explore new ways to support students through the implementation of discounted post-secondary student fares and expansion of the *Fair Pass Transit Discount Program* at the *Toronto Transit Commission*.

6 - HOUSING:

In the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's latest report, the average monthly cost for a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto was \$1421 during the Fall of 2020, which is a [13% increase](#) from 2 years prior. Often, post-secondary students have to work multiple jobs in order to receive adequate accommodation near their campus, or they may be required to rent a unit that is either unsafe or far from campus. We appreciate the Province's *Transit Oriented Community* (TOC) plans to improve housing supply and access to transit, however, these steps are not enough to tackle the long-standing issues in the rental market. New rental supply is only meeting [half](#) of the current demand, which further prices out students and low-income households from high-density areas.

RECOMMENDATION: Further promote the development of purpose-built rental housing to address the projected annual deficit of [19,500](#) rental supply units (*average*) expected over the next 10 years.

RECOMMENDATION: Provide funding for municipal and provincial rent relief programs to support low-income residents

RECOMMENDATION: Invest in the *Social Infrastructure Fund* to support the creation of more affordable rental units and increase the supply of affordable housing stock. There has been a decline in the creation of new units since the [2016-17 fiscal year](#).



Final Words

Though we have excluded some recommendations for the sake of brevity, the UTSU welcomes the opportunity to provide perspective on any other student-centered initiatives that the council may wish to inquire into.

Thank you for your time and consideration.