



POLICY PAPER

A Comprehensive Access Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper seeks to offer a comprehensive vision of a strategy to address the multiple barriers that face groups of people who are currently underrepresented in Ontario's post-secondary education system. This paper seeks to give an overview of the groups that are currently underrepresented, and to explore the barriers they face, including but not limited to: financial, informational/motivational and academic barriers. We seek to acknowledge that the complex and multi-faceted nature of barriers that effect access require a holistic package of interventions, that address the unique needs of individuals and communities.

Our recommendations for the implementation of a comprehensive access strategy include addressing the following areas:

The Provincial Government's role in implementing a comprehensive access strategy: We believe the Provincial Government should play an instrumental role in coordinating, funding and evaluating access initiatives:

- The provincial government should implement a comprehensive access strategy to foster increased participation of underrepresented groups in all types of post- secondary education.

Early Outreach programs have demonstrated success in improving participation rates among underrepresented groups. Therefore we believe that:

- Early outreach programs should be tailored to the unique needs of a community and coordinated to ensure that community plans effectively support the programs;
- Early outreach programs need to combine social and academic supports through a blend of mentoring, tutoring, and other engagement activities to ensure academic success of students in early outreach programs;
- The government should look to the successful Pathways to Education Canada model when exploring community driven outreach programs and expanding access to the program within Ontario;
- Institutions should focus on developing partnerships with local organizations that already have relationships with young people from underrepresented communities (such as employment centres, youth groups, Aboriginal elders, etc.) for the purposes of information sharing on post-secondary pathways.

Primary and secondary educators have a vital role to play in ensuring all their students are able to select the best post-secondary pathway. We believe progress can be achieved in the following areas:

- Each secondary school should have at least one Certified Career Development Practitioner on-staff within their guidance counselling team;

- The process of guidance and counselling should seek to be less stigmatizing, by ensuring all students to set-up meetings with counsellors throughout high school, in order to ensure that they are personally prepared for their transition into post-secondary education, including advice about course streaming and selection in Grade 9;
- Guidance counsellors should receive regular skills updating, in regards to processes such as OSAP and financial aid, the process of applying to PSE, and the secondary courses and grades required to apply for university;
- Primary and secondary schools should provide information and resources to students, families, and communities to assist in making better informed decisions about educational pathways. These resources include, but are not limited to, improved guidance counselling, parental involvement activities, and curriculum changes;
- Dual credit programs in high schools should be funded and expanded within Ontario colleges and should be introduced, monitored and evaluated at the university level;
- The Ministry of Education should phase out secondary school streaming;
- The Ministry of Education, local school boards, and secondary schools should work collaboratively to ensure that all secondary school students are able to pursue advanced placement programs;
- Students should be advised more carefully about the implications of entering into different academic streams, beginning well in advance of selecting streamed courses, and transfer between applied and academic courses should be facilitated by access to transfer credits that can be taken during regular school hours.

Pathway mobility is important to ensure that an access strategy serve the needs of all students, offering flexibility to students who take “non-traditional” routes through their education. OUSA believes that:

- The Ministry of Education should continue to develop enrichment programs such as co-op credits and high skills major programs that are designed to increase motivation and retention of students from underrepresented groups;
- Bridging programs should be encouraged, funded, and evaluated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities to help students with insufficient credits or inadequate entrance averages enter post-secondary education;
- Transition programs should be encouraged, funded, and evaluated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, and a provincial database should be created that would allow students to easily find transition programs within their area and which meet their individual needs.

Online learning offers an alternative pathway to PSE for many students from underrepresented groups, and holds the potential to reduce financial, social,

physical and geographical barriers to access. OUSA therefore recommends that:

- As part of a comprehensive access strategy the government should continue to support online education programs. However, support for online programs should act as a supplement, not a replacement, for person to person outreach.

Cost-aversion is still a major barrier to access for many students from underrepresented groups. Students believe that improving the Student Financial Assistance and better communicating where aid is available is crucial to supporting increased participation:

- As part of a comprehensive access strategy, the government should continue to strengthen the student financial assistance system so all students can access post-secondary education;
- As part of a holistic strategy, sector stakeholders should seek to demystify some of the beliefs held about PSE, such as the availability of financial aid, job outcomes, debt levels, etc.;
- The secondary school system should continue to teach best practices about being financially prepared for the costs of post-secondary education: including lessons about budgeting, applying for financial assistance, scholarships, etc. for both students and their families, and/or guardians;
- The provincial government should set aside grant money that would specifically go towards providing financial assistance to students who would be required to take a transition program before entering a degree program.

Applications and admissions systems play a vital role in the transition from secondary to post-secondary. Recruitment strategies are important tools for educating young people about the choices available to them, while admissions data could be more effectively used as a tool for tracking patterns of access. OUSA recommends that:

- The government should establish a centralized agency to assist public institutions with achieving goals to increase participation rates in higher education for underrepresented groups;
- Universities should be required to develop annual “Access Agreements” to set goals and plans to increase outreach and enrolment amongst groups who face barriers to participation or are traditionally underrepresented in PSE;
- PSE institutions should target their admission outreach towards communities that have a history of underrepresentation in PSE;
- As part of the Ontario Universities’ Application Centre, demographic information from applicants should be collected including, self-identification of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, first generation status, family income, etc.

- Universities should integrate Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition into their application and admissions processes.

OUSA believes that to be successful, a comprehensive access strategy requires effective funding mechanisms in order to achieve its ends. We therefore recommend:

- The government should dedicate funding aimed at institution-specific and system-wide initiatives that aim to improve participation rates of underrepresented groups.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Ontario can be rightly proud of its position as a world-leader in post-secondary education, home to one of the most highly educated populations in the world. Amongst people aged 25-64, 64 per cent of Ontarians have attained some form of post-secondary education (PSE).¹ This places Ontario as a leader amongst the Canadian provinces, and above the OECD average.²

However, despite much cause for celebration, it remains a sobering reality that for some groups, post-secondary education remains an unattainable dream. In spite of the encouraging commitment of successive Ontario governments to improving access to PSE, there remains much work to be done in addressing the underrepresentation of certain groups within society. For young people from these groups, a complex and interconnected set of barriers, including financial, motivational, informational and academic barriers, may be preventing them from achieving their academic potential post-high school.

This should be of concern to all of us. Apart from the self-evident issues of equity, that all qualified students should have the means to attend a post-secondary institution irrespective of their background, it is important for the future economic health of our province to address this issue. As the labour market changes, increasing numbers of jobs will require post-secondary training. In recognition of this, the Provincial Government, in the Open Ontario Plan (2010), committed to reaching a PSE attainment level of 70 per cent by 2021.³ Although Ontario is nearing this target, changes to the demographic profile of Ontario, mean that maintaining this participation rate in the long-term will require widening access to students who have traditionally had lower participation rates in PSE.

The benefits of post-secondary education in contributing to a prosperous and thriving society are well documented: Ontarians with a post-secondary degree are more likely to live longer, be healthier, commit fewer crimes, vote in larger numbers, donate to charity, and volunteer in their communities.⁴ Individuals too, will have significantly better labour market outcomes if they have a post-secondary education: for example, the employment rate for those with a post-secondary education is 72.6 percent, far outstripping those with only a high-school diploma (61.4 per cent).⁵ Moreover, given parents who have attained PSE are far more likely to have children who go on to PSE,⁶ the benefits of increasing access to underrepresented groups will accrue over time, and may play a role in breaking cycles of inequality and poverty. However, given that studies have illustrated that Canadians over-estimate the cost of post-secondary, and under-estimate the rate of return on gaining a post-secondary qualification,⁷ it is the responsibility of the government, primary and secondary schools, post-secondary institutions and

¹ Statistics Canada. *Table A.1.1 Distribution of the 25- to 64-year-old population, by highest level of education attained and sex, Canada, provinces and territories, 2010*. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2012)

² Statistics Canada. *Educational Indicators in Canada: An International Perspective* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2012)

³ Ontario Government. *Open Ontario: Ontario's plan for jobs and growth*. (Toronto: Ontario Government, 2010) Retrieved Aug. 30th, 2013 from : http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2010/papers_all.pdf

⁴ Ross Finnie, Childs S. & Wismer A. *Underrepresented Groups in Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence from the Youth in Transition Survey*. (Toronto: HEQCO, 2011)

⁵ TD Economics, *Special Report: Post-Secondary Education is the Best Investment You Can Make* (Toronto: TD Canada, 2011)

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

stakeholders to ensure that young people are well-informed about the benefits of going on to higher education.

In this paper, we have identified that following groups as facing significant barriers in their access of post-secondary education: low-income students; Aboriginal students; rural and northern students; first-generations; students with dependents and mature students; students with disabilities; visible minority students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students; francophone students; and Crown Wards. However, we are aware that these categories are hardly uniform in their experiences of education, and recognize that many of these identities may overlap: for example, Aboriginal students are more likely to be low-income, or Crown Wards may face many of the same informational issues as first-generation students.

The barriers that act as deterrents for PSE participants can also be complex, multi-faceted and interlocking. In this paper we have broadly categorized the following barriers that may impact an individual's decision on whether to pursue post-secondary: financial, motivational/informational, and academic. However the categories are hardly discrete: for example, a lack of ability to access information about the financial assistance system may exacerbate the price-sensitivity of low-income students.

Given the complex sets of barriers that many students from underrepresented groups face, closing participation gaps will require a long-term commitment to pursuing a comprehensive access strategy. Any efforts to address issues of access should make coordinated efforts to address multiple barriers, and be well targeted to marginalized or underrepresented communities. An effective access strategy should reach children in elementary school, provide information on available pathways, and be followed by appropriate supports in high school and beyond to help students succeed on the pathway they choose to follow. These programs should be coordinated with relevant community and institutional partners, to ensure they are culturally relevant, and to secure the “buy-in” of all stakeholders in promoting success.

It is important to acknowledge the importance of “success” in planning a comprehensive access strategy. OUSA believes it is not simply enough to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups enrolling in PSE, but that attention should be given to how they succeed once they get there. Furthermore, students believe that this broader concept of access acknowledges that while certain students may not always be underrepresented in strict numerical terms, they can still face barriers in accessing and succeeding while at university. Strategies for retention, and supports for students who may be struggling are vital to ensuring young people excel at PSE. Access does not end at the threshold of a PSE campus, but should be an integral part of an institution's culture, faculty and staff training, and support services. OUSA has therefore outlined our vision for how a supportive and high quality environment can be fostered in our Student Success policy paper.

The recommendations outlined in this paper are a starting point: a comprehensive access strategy should be continually changing and evolving to meet the complex needs of students, their families, schools and communities. However, this paper does offer a set of guiding principles, an overview of the situation as it currently stands, and a vision of some of the models and best practices that a comprehensive access strategy might encompass.

SECTION TWO: PRINCIPLES

The following principles underlie OUSA's policy on access to post-secondary education:

Principle One: All willing and qualified students in Ontario should be able to access and excel within Ontario's system of post-secondary education.

While post-secondary participation in Ontario has increased steadily in recent decades, certain groups remain underrepresented in our post-secondary institutions. In fact, participation gaps in Ontario are greater than the national average,⁸ and participation gaps between the top income quartile and lowest income quartile in Ontario have been increasing since 2003.⁹

OUSA recognizes both the individual and societal advantage of higher education from an economic perspective. Post-secondary education has significant economic returns, with a better employment rate, and lower rates of unemployment. The employment rate for those with a post-secondary education is 72.6 percent, far outstripping those with only a high-school diploma (61.4 per cent), while the unemployment rate of post-secondary graduates is 6 per cent, compared to 9 per cent for those who only completed high school.¹⁰ Moreover, in the Open Ontario Plan, the Ontario government estimated that that in the future 70 per cent of all jobs will require some form of post-secondary education or training.¹¹ As such, the provincial government has committed to raising the post-secondary attainment rate from 64 per cent in 2010 to 70 per cent by 2015. With a declining birth rate and the demographic pressures of an aging and retiring workforce, Canada will be hard pressed to maintain the current levels of knowledge-based labour supply.¹² To ensure the workforce meets the needs of the economy, Ontario will need to increase participation in PSE among traditionally underrepresented groups. Aside from the notion that all students should have an equal opportunity to access higher education, the economic need to engage underrepresented groups in PSE is clear.¹³

In addition to the economic benefits of post-secondary education, the social benefits of post-secondary education are evident. Ontarians with a post-secondary degree are more likely to live longer, be healthier, commit fewer crimes, vote in larger numbers, donate to charity and volunteer in their communities. Moreover, there is an increasing rate of return on an educated population: students whose parents attended PSE are twice as likely to attend university as students whose parents obtained a high school diploma or less.¹⁴

It is important to note that is not simply getting higher numbers of students through the doors of post-secondary institutions (what some researchers have referred to as “threshold” access). Students believe that young people from underrepresented groups

⁸ Finnie, *Underrepresented Groups in Post-Secondary Education in Ontario*

⁹ Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Third Annual Review and Research Plan*. (Toronto: HEQCO, 2010).

¹⁰ TD Economics, *Special Report: Post-Secondary Education is the Best Investment You Can Make*

¹¹ Ontario Government. *Open Ontario: Ontario's plan for jobs and growth*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2010)

¹² Thomas Courchene, *Citistates and the State of Cities: Political-Economy and Fiscal-Federalism Dimensions* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2005).

¹³ Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Immigrant Study: Caribbean students least likely to pursue higher education* (Toronto, 2010).

¹⁴ Finnie, Child. & Wismer *Underrepresented Groups in Postsecondary Education in Ontario*

should have meaningful choices about how they pursue their higher education, including program choice, location, etc. Furthermore, improving access for underrepresented groups should be seen as part of an ongoing process that includes strategies for retention and supporting students to excel whilst they are in post-secondary education. That said, for the purposes of this paper, access refers to a meaningful expectation of admission and success within the post-secondary system, and not necessarily entry to one's preferred institutional destination.

Given the accumulated long-term benefits of post-secondary education for both individual and society, it is imperative that all students, regardless of their background, who are willing and qualified to attend a post-secondary institution should be able to do so. Given that many students from underrepresented groups face barriers related to socio-economic status, systemic discrimination, and other obstacles, it is vital that the proper social interventions are employed in order to avoid perpetuating a cycle of inequality for already marginalized groups.

Principle Two: A comprehensive strategy should be devised that addresses all barriers and ensures access to post-secondary education for all willing and qualified students.

Given the multi-faceted and overlapping barriers that can exist for underrepresented groups, it is important to recognize the need for a comprehensive strategy to address issues of access. Given that it is rarely one factor that acts as a barrier to access, it is necessary for policy makers to take a holistic approach to creating an environment that will promote greater participation of underrepresented groups.¹⁵ Evidence suggests that – due to the complex interaction between different barriers to post-secondary education – it is often programs that take a ‘multi-faceted’ or packaged approach that are most successful in alleviating barriers.¹⁶

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the Ontario government has made commitments to improving access, such as implementing the Access to Opportunities Strategy in 2007, experts have criticized the limitations of the current fragmented approach to improving access to PSE. Authors of the *Institutional Strategy and Practice* report argue that not only is such an approach limited, but it can result in conflicting agendas and be more difficult to evaluate effectiveness.¹⁷ For instance, a robust financial assistance program is vital to overcoming financial barriers; however, it should be viewed as one piece of the larger access issue rather than a competing priority. OUSA believes that a holistic approach, which utilises a variety of co-ordinated interventions, offers the most effective path to addressing the issues of access, participation and retention of underrepresented groups.

Principle Three: Costs should not act as a barrier, whether perceived or actual, for willing and qualified students to their desired post-secondary pathway.

¹⁵ Berger, Motte & Parkin *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada Fourth Edition* (Montreal, QC: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009)

¹⁶ Canadian Council on Learning *Lessons in Learning Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Who is missing out?* (Ottawa: 2009)

¹⁷ Alan Wright, Mariane Frenay, Marie-Jeanne Monette, Bihter Tomen, Louise Sauvé, Clayton Smith, Neil Gold, Don Houston, Jackie Robinson, Norman Rowen, Fran Anderson, Kenton Lewis, Brenda Pipitone, Geri Salinitri, and Bev Hamilton, *Institutional Strategy and Practice: Increasing the Odds of Access and Success at the Post-Secondary Level for Underrepresented Students*, (Montreal, Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2008).

The costs of post-secondary education can seem daunting to any individual, but can be especially concerning to individuals from such underrepresented groups as low-income groups, or LGBTQ students who may not have familial financial support. Students in Ontario pay an average of \$7928.12 in tuition and fees,¹⁸ the highest amount in Canada. Students are likely to incur other significant costs related to their education, including paying between \$800 - \$1000 in textbooks and course materials.¹⁹ The high cost of tuition, fees, and academic materials is in addition to potential costs of living on or near an out-of-town campus.

The impact of these costs is amplified by a tendency to overestimate the true cost of attending post-secondary. Studies have shown that Canadians generally tend to overestimate the cost of post-secondary education, but that individuals from underrepresented groups (for example, from low-income backgrounds) overestimate the costs to a greater degree.²⁰ Lack of information about the availability of financial aid and debt-aversion amongst underrepresented groups can exacerbate this issue.

Students recognize that financial barriers are not the only barriers that exist, but are concerned that financial barriers impact underrepresented groups, many of whom come from low-income backgrounds, may have limited familial history or knowledge of higher education, and may have disregarded post-secondary pathways due to perceptions of costs, financial aid, and debt.

Principle Four: An access strategy should start during primary education, continue through the completion of post-secondary education, and address multiple barriers preventing equal participation, including, but not limited to financial, informational, motivational and academic factors.

Studies have shown that nearly half of young people decide whether or not they will attend a post-secondary institution before Grade Nine.²¹ Moreover, factors that develop throughout childhood and adolescence, including grades, home environment, and career aspirations influence the decision to pursue higher education.²² Furthermore, early deciders are more likely to have savings in preparation for post-secondary education, are less likely to drop out of PSE and are more likely to spend more time studying during their education than undertaking paid work.²³ Given that decisions about PSE are made early, and have implications for the future success of students, it is imperative that an access strategy start early as well. Many studies show that informational programs regarding higher education that start early and are coordinated through both elementary and secondary school are the most effective.²⁴ Additionally, information dissemination should address a wide range of barriers, including motivational, informational and academic barriers, in addition to providing information on financial aid. It is also

¹⁸ Based on figures from Statistics Canada, *Undergraduate Tuition Fees for Full-Time Canadian Students, by Province, by Discipline* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2013) and Common Universities Data Ontario, *First Year Domestic Tuition and Ancillary Fees by Program* (Toronto: Council of Ontario Universities, 2013)

¹⁹ Financial Consumer Agency of Canada, "Budget for Student Life – How Much Will Your Post-Secondary Education Cost?" 2013. Available online: <http://www.fcac-acfc.gc.ca/Eng/forConsumers/lifeEvents/payingPostSecEd/Pages/Budgetfo-Unbudget.aspx> (Accessed 2013-10-04)

²⁰ TD Economics. *Special Report: Post-secondary education is the best investment you can make.*

²¹ Finnie, Childs & Wismer *When Did You Decide?*

²² Finnie, Mueller, et al. *New perspectives on access to post-secondary education.*

²³ Finnie, Childs & Wismer *When Did You Decide?*

²⁴ Alisa Cunningham, Christina Redmond, and Jamie Merisotis, *Investing Early Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*, (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2003)

important to recognize that barriers are not always mutually exclusive or separable, and that results are most likely to be seen if multiple barriers are tackled simultaneously.

Principle Five: An access strategy should support students in choosing the post-secondary pathway that best suits their competency, skills, and interests.

It is important to recognize that there are many pathways to higher education and that students should be given the resources, information and support to make decisions that make the most sense for them. Any comprehensive access strategy should provide neutral, fact-based information to illustrate possible career paths and the benefits of various PSE pathways to university, college and the skilled trades.

However, while OUSA firmly believes in the importance and value of colleges and apprenticeship programs in a vibrant post-secondary education sector, it is crucial students from underrepresented backgrounds are not unduly pushed to pursue these paths. As a conversation develops in Canada around a perceived “skills-mismatch”²⁵ and universities pumping out large numbers of the “wrong graduates”²⁶ it is important that young people feel supported to follow their interests and are not discouraged from pursuing a university education. While commentators in the media question the value of a degree, OUSA’s research has shown that a university degree still provides the best long-term labour market outcomes. Over the age of 25, those with a university degree have consistently higher employment and lower unemployment than those with a college degree, in both times of prosperity and recession,²⁷ while a recent study conducted by McMaster University and United Way Toronto on precarious employment showed that those with university degrees were more likely to have stable and secure employment situations.²⁸ Given the long-term benefits of a university education, it is important not to misinform or place new informational barriers in the way of young people considering undertaking a university degree.

Principle Six: The provincial government should play the leading role in creating and funding an access strategy and subsequent programs.

Addressing access to post-secondary education is the primary responsibility of the provincial government. In order to fully address access, the concept should be re-defined. Current discussions of access often revolve around student financial assistance at the post-secondary level. While financial aid is a critical component of an access strategy, this approach does not address the serious questions about access that start much earlier in a student’s academic career. In addition to student financial assistance at the post-secondary level, an access strategy should extend into elementary and secondary schools, post-secondary institutions and communities. Through the inclusion of multiple actors that address student’s needs early on, an effective access strategy can tackle the many non-financial obstacles that might prevent underrepresented groups from enrolling in PSE including informational, motivational and academic barriers. The provincial government has the resources, community links, and mandate to deal with all components of access at an earlier stage.

²⁵ TD Economics *Jobs in Canada: Where, what, and for whom? (Preliminary Report)* (Toronto: TD, 2013)

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Martin, Chris *Youth Employment: Re-imagining the link between learning and labour* (Toronto: OUSA, 2013)

²⁸ Lewchuck, et al. *It’s more than poverty: Employment Precarity and Household Well-Being*. (Toronto: Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario Research Group, 2013)

Principle Seven: The creation of an access strategy and subsequent programs should be founded on comprehensive data about trends in admissions and enrolment in post-secondary education for underrepresented groups.

In order to succeed, a comprehensive access strategy should be based on effective systems and programs. In order to ensure the efficient targeting of resources designed to increase access among underrepresented groups, it is vital that programming is based on a strong foundation of comprehensive data that tracks trends in post-secondary pathways and program selections, and which is capable of identifying gaps where they exist.

The government, post-secondary institutions, and community agencies all put in place policies and programs that aim to benefit particular groups of students, and these can only be enhanced with a complete picture of how barriers are impacting post-secondary education access.

Principle Eight: To be successful, early outreach programs should be long-term, supported by multiple provincial government ministries, and coordinated strategically within the municipalities and local communities, with the inclusion of existing programs.

Research demonstrates that the more community support there is committed to early outreach projects and programs, the more effective they will be.²⁹ In developing solutions that address local concerns, it is important that an access model be flexible, so it can adjust to appropriately fit community needs. An example of such a program is the Pathways to Education Canada program in Toronto's Regent Park, which has successfully integrated approaches that acknowledge the interconnectivity of poverty, health, and education. In working to develop such programs, the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities should look to engage the local school boards, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Community & Social Services and the Ministry of Citizenship & Immigration through funding commitments and the leveraging of resources and community and ministerial links. In addition, long-term support for access programs provides stability and consistency for students, while enabling the program to grow and change in response to community input.

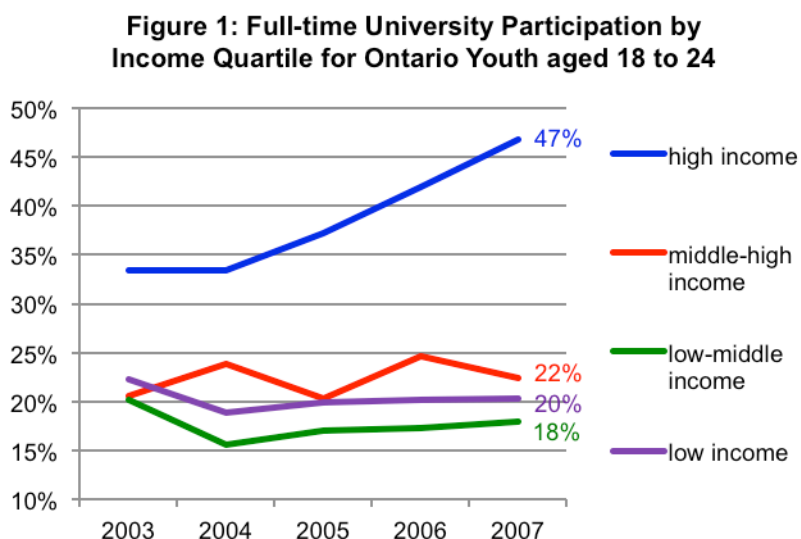
²⁹ Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, *Investing Early: Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*

SECTION THREE – OVERVIEW OF UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

Terms like “underrepresented” and “high priority” groups can be used to categorize a wide range of people with varying experiences together, and as such are extremely broad terms. OUSA acknowledges that there are significant individual contexts for each of these groups, and that even within the same underrepresented group individuals may express very different experiences of barriers or advocate for different solutions to the problem. For example, in a focus group of first-generation students held at Brock University, some participants felt that early exposure to post-secondary campuses would be valuable in reducing information barriers, while others felt that providing better information to their parents through secondary schools would be necessary.³⁰ Students therefore believe that there is unlikely to be a “one-size fits all” model to address access barriers for all potential post-secondary education students in Ontario. Rather, students believe that a holistic approach to access, which responds to the needs of communities and individuals, are the best way to tackle barriers to access for underrepresented groups.

In this section, we consider some of the key access barriers for the following groups: low-income students; Aboriginal students; rural and northern students; first-generations; students with dependents and mature students; students with disabilities; visible minority students; LGBTQ students; francophone students; and Crown Wards.

Low-income students



Studies have repeatedly shown that youth from low-income families have a much lower PSE participation rate. A report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario showed that students with a family income of \$50,000 have an overall PSE enrolment rate of 35.2 per cent, ten percentage points lower than students with a family income of \$50,000 and above.

This gap widens to

fourteen percentage points when university participation alone is considered: students from low-income background have an enrolment rate of 35.2 per cent compared to 49.2 per cent of students with a family income of \$50,000 or above.³¹

As displayed in Figures 1³² and 2,³³ the participation gap between students from low and

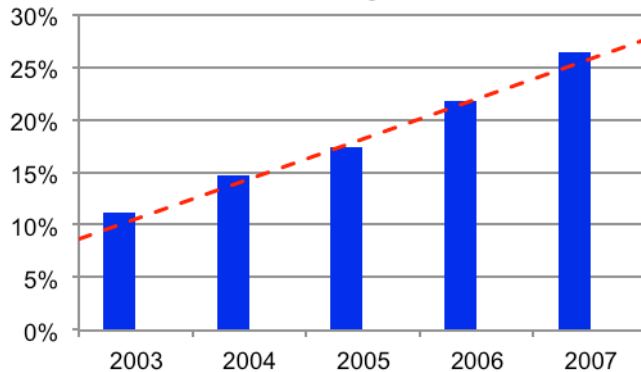
³⁰ First Generation Focus Group, Brock University, October 28th, 2010.

³¹ Finnie, Childs & Wismer. *Underrepresented Groups in Post-Secondary Education*

³² HEQCO. *Third annual review and research plan*.

high income families has not changed appreciably since the early 2000s, and has been increasing steadily since 2003.³⁴ Additionally, income-related gaps in participation largely disappear when examining registration rates. That is, the same proportion of university applicants who apply from low- and high-income groups are accepted to university, and ultimately register for courses. In large part then, the participation gap stems from low-income students applying to university more infrequently than their high-income counterparts, rather than differences in acceptance rates.³⁵

**Figure 2: University Participation Gap
between Low and High Income Quartiles
for Ontario Youth aged 18 to 24¹⁷**



Both financial and non-financial factors have been shown to play a role in the lower PSE participation rates of low-income students. One study found that 12 per cent of Canadian low-income students were financially constrained in applying to university, that is, they were unable to fund their education sufficiently through savings, loans, and bursaries.³⁶ It should be noted that this 12 per cent does not include students that were discouraged by financial factors from applying to university in the first place. Moreover, studies have shown that people from lower income backgrounds (a family income of \$30,000 or less) tended to overestimate expected costs the cost of tuition by a greater amount relative to those people in higher income brackets, and to underestimate the financial benefits of higher education.³⁷ Given that low-income students tend to be more sensitive to price increases in PSE, and have greater anxiety about their ability to pay back their loans when they graduate³⁸ it is important that they are well informed about the actual costs and benefits of pursuing post-secondary education at any early age.

Meanwhile, parental and environmental influences are hypothesized to be equally, if not more important, than financial factors in explaining the lower PSE participation rate of low-income students. Youth from low-income families tend to perform worse on standardized tests and have lower secondary school grades, not due to any intrinsic difference in ability, but rather because low-income students are more likely to attend poorer quality schools and less likely to have parental expectations to complete a

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Dooley, M.D., A.A Payne, & A.L Robb. *University participation and income differences: an analysis of applications by Ontario Secondary School Students*. (Toronto: HEQCO, 2009)

³⁶ Frenette, Marc. *Why are youth from lower-income families less likely to attend university? Evidence from academic abilities, parental influences, and financial constraints*. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007)

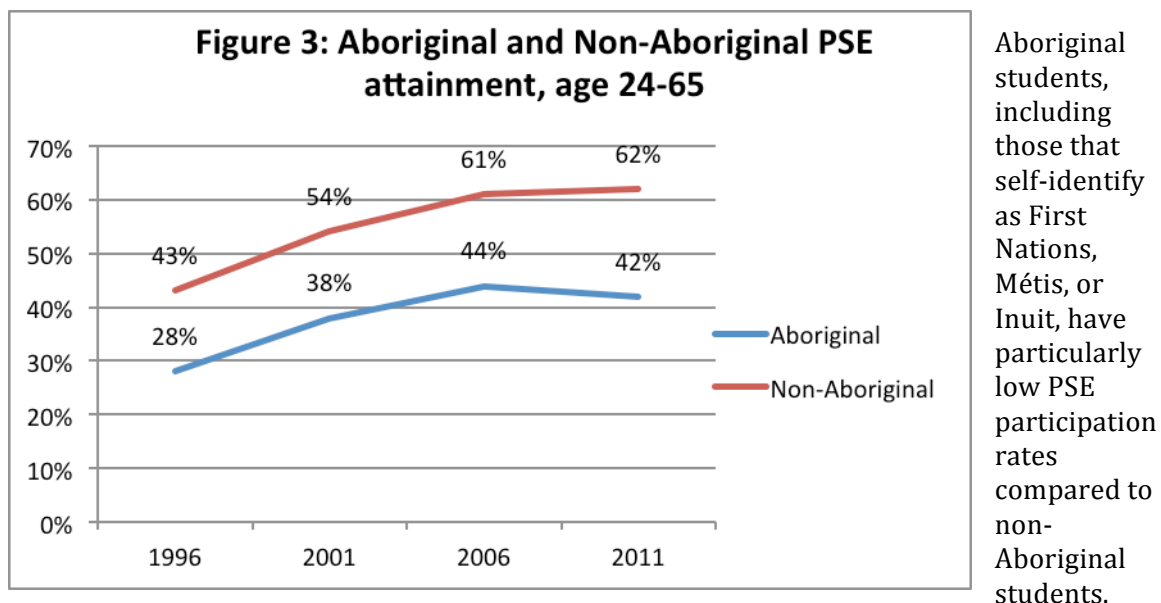
³⁷ TD Economics. *Special Report: Post-secondary education is the best investment you can make*.

³⁸ Palameta & Voyer. *Willingness to pay for postsecondary education among underrepresented groups*.

degree.³⁹ Living in areas where a high proportion of residents fall below the low-income cut-off level is correlated with a higher proportion of students dropping out before completing secondary school, and lower overall academic achievement.⁴⁰ Furthermore, paid employment during secondary school negatively effects university participation,⁴¹ which may impact the ability of low-income students to achieve the grades necessary to enter the post-secondary system. In addition to lessening the pressure on secondary school students to find work, families with more financial resources can pay for activities that can influence the educational success of children, such as purchasing books and computers for children, enrolling youth in extracurricular activities, paying for higher quality daycare, and living in neighbourhoods with better schools. These actions may result in higher performance on standardized and scholastic tests, and thus, in a higher probability of attending university in the future.⁴³

It is clear that the challenge of increasing post-secondary participation rates among low-income students will require more than one solution.

Aboriginal



While recent research⁴⁴ has shown that across Canada the post-secondary education attainment rate for Aboriginal peoples has risen, from 28 per cent in 1996 to 42 per cent in 2011, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is actually increasing. As Figure 3⁴⁵ illustrates, the gap has risen from 15 percentage points in 1996 to 20 percentage points in 2011. This indicates that aboriginal participation rates are failing to keep pace with the increases amongst the non-Aboriginal population.

³⁹ Frenette. *Why are youth from lower-income families less likely to attend university?*

⁴⁰ Sweet, Robert, Anisef, Walters & Phythian. *Post-high school pathways of immigrant youth.*

⁴¹ Finnie, Ross, Richard Mueller, Arthur Sweetman & Alex Usher. *New perspectives on access to post-secondary education.* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2009)

⁴² Mueller, Richard. *Access and persistence from low-income background in Canadian post-secondary education.* (Toronto: Mesa Project, 2008)

⁴³ Frenette, . *Why are youth from lower-income families less likely to attend university?*

⁴⁴ Gordon, Catherine & Jerry White. *Supply Side of Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada.* (Draft) Presented at Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education Conference, Toronto: October 7, 2013.

⁴⁵ *ibid*

Furthermore, the attainment gaps can look significantly different depending on whether an Aboriginal person is status or non-status, living on or off reserve, and depending on their identification (First Nations, Inuit, Métis), as the table⁴⁶ below illustrates:

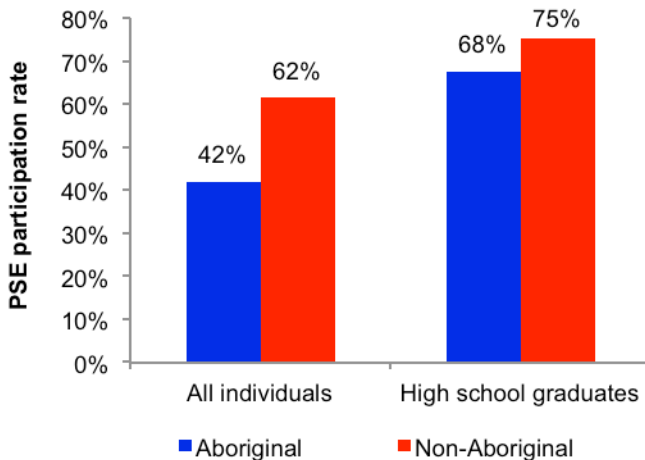
PSE attainment (per cent) age 24-65, 2011	
Non-Aboriginal	62
Status	47
Non-Status	36
On Reserve	46
Off Reserve	27
First Nations	38
Inuit	25
Métis	49

In Ontario Aboriginal peoples have comparable participation in trade certificates, apprenticeships, and college programs as non-Aboriginals. However, only 9 per cent of the Ontario Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 has a university certificate or degree, as compared with 26 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Based on data from: Gordon & White. *Supply Side of Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada*.

⁴⁷ R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. *Promising Practices: Increasing and supporting participation for Aboriginal students in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2010.

Figure 4: Impact of Secondary School Completion on Aboriginal PSE Attainment in Canada, Ages 25 to 34



A significant factor in this participation gap is related to the much higher than average high school dropout rates for Aboriginal youth.⁴⁸ The percentage of Aboriginal people aged 25-64 who have less than high school is 35 per cent, more than double that of non-aboriginal people, at 15 per cent.⁴⁹ This number rises as high as half of all youth for on-reserve and Inuit communities.⁵⁰ One study found that only 42 per cent of First Nations youth between the ages of 20 and 24, who lived on reserve had completed a secondary school education, as compared with 85 per cent of non-Aboriginal youth in the same age

cohort.⁵¹ It is worth noting, as Figure 4⁵² demonstrates, that Aboriginal students who have graduated secondary school have similar, though slightly lower, overall PSE participation rates as the non-Aboriginal population, indicating that increasing the secondary school completion rate is an important step in raising post-secondary participation of Aboriginal youth as a whole.

Aboriginal students face a complex array of financial and non-financial barriers in accessing post-secondary education. In financial terms, students are concerned that there is inadequate support to meet the needs of Aboriginal students. Despite the acknowledgement that raising post-secondary attainment rates for Aboriginal students requires significant investment in funding, the federal Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) has been arbitrarily capped at increases of 2 per cent per year. Funding through the Ontario government for Aboriginal post-secondary education increased by \$11m in 2010, but the government has indicated that any sustainable funding is yet to be determined.⁵³ Funding shortages at the post-secondary level are compounded by the chronic underfunding of education for Aboriginal students at the primary and secondary level. Inadequate funding has a bearing on the ability of communities to implement early outreach programs, the establishment of Aboriginal student support services, the development of Aboriginal curriculum and pedagogy, and the ability to undertake program evaluation.

⁴⁸ Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. *Post-secondary student access and retention strategies*. Literature Review. (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009)

⁴⁹ Gordon & White. *Supply Side of Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada*.

⁵⁰ Berger, Joseph, Anne Motte, & Andrew Parkin. *The Price of Knowledge: access and student finance in Canada*. 4th Edition. (Montreal: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009)

⁵¹ R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. *Access to opportunity first generation initiative: evaluation of selected projects*. (Toronto: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2009)

⁵² Adapted from: Mendelson, Michael. *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education in Canada*. (Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2006)

⁵³ Frechette, Jean-Guy. *Ontario's Aboriginal Education Strategy: Presentation to the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance*. (Toronto: Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities and Ministry of Education, 2011)

The high-costs of post-secondary education in Ontario, a lack of sufficient support, and insufficient knowledge about financial assistance that is available may all contribute to the financial barriers faced by Aboriginal young people considering post-secondary education. Studies have shown that Aboriginal students have greater price sensitivity to increases in the costs of PSE and are more adverse to entering debt to finance their education.⁵⁴

Aboriginal students also face a number of non-financial barriers in accessing and persisting through PSE. Approximately 30 per cent of Aboriginal students leave PSE without graduating in their first or second year of study, compared with only 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal students.⁵⁵ Family responsibilities were cited as another major obstacle to completing a post-secondary accreditation.⁵⁶ Additionally, Aboriginal youth from remote and rural areas must travel far distances to pursue post-secondary studies. Some studies have found that Aboriginal post-secondary students experience strong anxiety related to feeling out of place in the institutional culture of university, and also being torn between the university environment and their commitment to their families and home communities.⁵⁷ A lack of employment opportunities in home communities may also serve as a motivational disincentive for Aboriginal youth to pursue PSE. Aboriginal students who complete higher education may feel pressured to remain in urban areas where their earning power is significantly enhanced, particularly if graduated students have high levels of debt. This migration presents a serious problem for Aboriginal communities that are struggling to stimulate economic development and speaks to the broader structural challenges that many of these communities face. Though Aboriginal students face a number of unique barriers, such as low secondary school completion rates, the familiar financial, geographic, informational and motivational barriers compound the problem. While solutions are often more difficult to implement due to the level of cooperation that is required between different levels of government, increasing accessibility to PSE for Aboriginals will similarly require addressing many overlapping barriers.

In acknowledgement of the unique barriers faced by Aboriginal students, OUSA has adopted policy specifically relating to this group.⁵⁸ In the Aboriginal Students paper, OUSA outlines recommendations to address issues of access and persistence for aboriginal students, including: implementation of early out-reach programs, improved financial assistance, and provision of support services on campus.

Rural/Northern

Despite the existence of a substantial northern and rural population in Ontario, university education is highly urbanized and southern: of Ontario's 20 universities, 16 are within 100 kilometers of highway 401 running along the southern edge of the province. Individuals from rural and northern communities are currently less likely than their urban and southern counterparts to attend university. One study found that students living in excess of eighty kilometres from a post-secondary institution were 58

⁵⁴ Palameta & Voyer. *Willingness to pay for postsecondary education among underrepresented groups*.

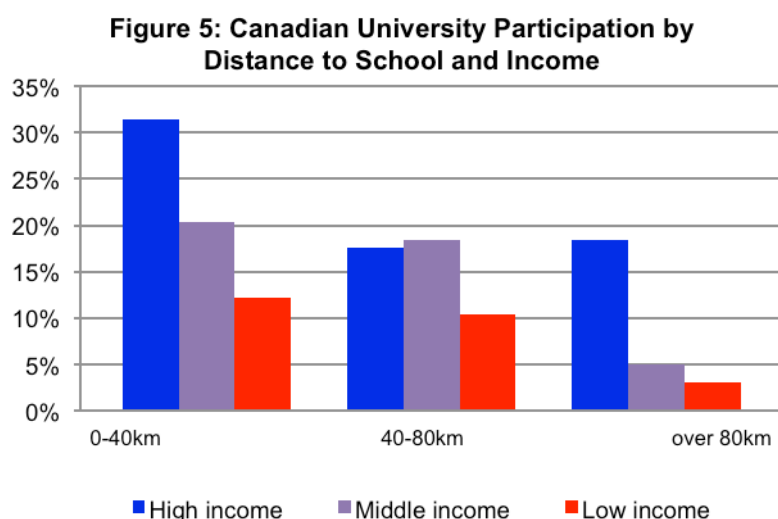
⁵⁵ Finnie, Ross, Stephen Childs, Miriam Kramer and Andrew Wismer. *Aboriginals in post-secondary education*. L-SLIS Research Brief. (Toronto: MESA Project, 2010)

⁵⁶ Palameta, & Voyer. *Willingness to pay for postsecondary education among underrepresented groups*

⁵⁷ Finnie, Childs & Wismer. *First Generation post-secondary education students*. L-SLIS Research Brief. (Toronto: MESA Project, 2010)

⁵⁸ Pin, Laura & Chris Rudnicki. *Aboriginal Students*. (Toronto: OUSA, 2011)

per cent less likely to enrol in PSE than students who live within 40 kilometres of an institution.⁵⁹ A more recent study found that the gap in Ontario is driven primarily by differences in university participation: Only 37 per cent of rural youth have enrolled in university, compared with 59 per cent of non-rural youth.⁶⁰ The regional gap in university participation between urban and rural youth is greater in Ontario than in any other province, and over three times greater in magnitude than that of Quebec.⁶¹



Fifteen per cent of Ontario's population lives beyond the 80 km threshold for commuting to a university, but only 3 per cent of secondary school students live beyond 80 km from a college. Consequently, those living far from a university may choose to study at a college instead, indicating institution choice is constrained by location.⁶² Rural and

northern students face the additional cost of attending college or university away from the parental home, which adds over \$7,000 to the annual cost of attending a post-secondary institution.⁶³ A focus group participant from a rural community explained, "why would you want to go to university when there is a college half an hour away for cheaper?" As Figure 5 shows, low-income rural youth have particularly low university participation rates.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ The burden of living expenses is compounded by the fact that rural areas tend to have slightly lower incomes than urban areas.

In addition to the increased costs of attending higher education away from home, students from rural and northern communities often face similar informational and motivational barriers. As seen in our focus groups, students from rural and northern areas may have fewer informational resources on PSE available to them, and rely more heavily on informal sources for information. Students from rural areas are more likely to have parents who did not complete secondary school, and less likely to have parents that attended university than their urban counterparts.⁶⁶ Many rural and northern students can experience familial isolation and feelings of being out of place when attending

⁵⁹ Frenette, Marc. *Too far to go on? Distance to school and university participation*. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2002)

⁶⁰ Looker, Dianne, *Regional Differences in Canadian rural-urban participation rates in post-secondary education*. (Toronto: MESA Project, 2009)

⁶¹ Berger, Motte, & Parkin. *The Price of Knowledge: access and student finance in Canada*. 4th Edition.

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ Frenette. *Too far to go on? Distance to school and university participation*.

⁶⁴ *ibid*

⁶⁵ Mueller. *Access and persistence from low-income background in Canadian post-secondary education*.

⁶⁶ Finnie, Ross, Stephen Childs & Andrew Wismer. *Large Urban, Small Urban and Rural Students*. L-SLIS Research Brief. (Toronto: MESA Project, 2010)

universities in urban areas.⁶⁷ Most concerning is that rural students are also somewhat more likely to drop-out of all forms of post-secondary education.⁶⁸

In recognition of the significant barriers faced by rural and northern students in accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education, OUSA has developed dedicated policy to address the specific concerns related to students from these groups. In the policy paper for Rural and Northern Students,⁶⁹ OUSA makes a range of recommendations, including: investing in early-outreach for rural and northern students; improving technology enabled learning, and continuing the Rural Connections Program to support the infrastructure for rural and northern communities; ensuring significant regulation and funding is in place for satellite campuses and northern universities; and increasing funding available to students under the Ontario Distance Grant.

First-Generation Students

First generation students are generally defined as students whose families do not have a history of post-secondary education: that is, their parents did not attend college or university. Research shows that parental education is one of the most important factors in whether a young person will enter post-secondary education, and what type of post-secondary institution they will enroll in. Of Canadian students whose parents have less than a secondary school diploma, 29 per cent enroll in PSE, a level that more than doubles to 72 per cent for those whose parents hold an undergraduate degree.⁷⁰ This disparity is at its greatest in terms of access to university: where 54 per cent of non-first generation youth enter university, compared to only 26 per cent of first generation youth.⁷¹

Family background and educational attainment of parents appeared to affect decisions to attend post-secondary education even among students who appear to be equally qualified and motivated.⁷² Moreover parental education is correlated with income and aspirations for their children, two factors which have been shown to impact PSE participation.⁷³ Some studies suggest that first-generation students need extra guidance and support to successfully apply to and enroll in PSE institutions because they have less support and guidance from their families.⁷⁴

First generation students are also much more likely to use student loans, and less likely to have family support to finance their education.^{75 76} Among university students, 52 per cent of non-first generation students have family members who saved for their education, while only 42 per cent of first generation students had financial support from their

⁶⁷ Finnie, Childs & Wismer. *First-Generation post-secondary education students*.

⁶⁸ Shaienks, Danielle, Tinasz Gluszynski, & Justin Baynard. *Post-secondary education participation and dropping out: Differences across university, college and other types of post-secondary institutions*. (Ottawa: Culture, Tourism, and the Centre for Education Statistics, 2009)

⁶⁹ Duchaine, Isabelle. *Rural and Northern Students*. (Toronto: OUSA, 2012)

⁷⁰ Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. *Post-Secondary student access and retention strategies*. Literature Review. (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009)

⁷¹ Finnie. *Underrepresented groups in post-secondary education in Ontario- evidence from the Youth in Transition survey*.

⁷² Finnie, Ross, Eric Lascelles & Arthur Sweetman. *Who Goes? The direct and indirect effect of family background on access to post-secondary education*. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2004)

⁷³ Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. *Post-Secondary student access and retention strategies*. Literature Review.

⁷⁴ R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. *Access to opportunity first generation initiative: evaluation of selected projects*.

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. *What Students Want: Results of the Ontario Student Survey*. (Toronto: OUSA, 2010).

families. Despite an increased reliance on financial aid, first generation students demonstrate less knowledge about the financial assistance system.⁷⁷ On average, they also spend slightly less time studying than non-first generation students, and have moderately lower grade averages, which may influence their ability to qualify for merit based scholarships.⁷⁸ Finally, first generation students are more likely to delay enrolment after secondary school, more likely to attend part-time, and more likely to work while attending PSE.⁷⁹

The resulting combination of these factors can present a complex interaction of financial, motivational, informational and academic barriers for first generation students, necessitating an access strategy that can address these challenges simultaneously.

Students with Dependants

Another group that is underrepresented in higher education is students with dependants. A student with a dependant is an individual who acts as a primary care-giver to an individual unable to meet their own life needs. While this relationship is usually interpreted as a parent caring for a child, dependency can also include elderly parents and relatives, or an individual suffering from a chronic illness, disability, or other condition requiring substantial care from a second party. However, since the term dependant most often refers to children when talking about post-secondary access, this section focuses primarily on students with dependent children.

Individuals who reported having a child by 26 were less than half as likely to have attended university as those with no children, and were twice as likely to have never attended any form of PSE.⁸⁰ Students with dependants tend to be older, are more likely to enroll part-time, are more likely to have interrupted their studies, and also tend to be female.⁸¹ The presence of a dependant is a greater barrier to participation for women.⁸² According to research by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, approximately 19 per cent of women between the ages of 20 to 24 had dependent children. However, only four per cent of 20-year-old women attending university reported having a child.⁸³ Younger children are typically a greater barrier to full-time university participation, as students with children under the age of five are much more likely to be studying part-time, compared to students with children over the age of twelve.⁸⁴

Students with dependants also face significant financial barriers to PSE, as they juggle the cost of caring for a dependant with the substantial expense of a post-secondary credential. They may also face additional financial barriers if they are studying part-time: Ontario students are not eligible for OSAP if they take less than 60 per cent of a full course load, or 40 per cent if they have a disability. Students should be enrolled in this

⁷⁷ R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. *Access to opportunity first generation initiative: evaluation of selected projects.*

⁷⁸ Finnie, Childs & Wismer *When Did You Decide?*

⁷⁹ R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. *Access to opportunity first generation initiative: evaluation of selected projects.*

⁸⁰ Shaienks, Danielle & Tomasz Gluszynski. *Participation in post-secondary education: graduates, continuers and drop outs, results from YITS cycle 4.* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007)

⁸¹ Junor & Usher *The price of knowledge 2004: access and student finance in Canada.*

⁸² Holmes, David. *Embracing difference: post-secondary education among Aboriginal Students, students with children, and students with disabilities.* (Ottawa: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005)

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ Junor, & Usher *The price of knowledge 2004: access and student finance in Canada.*

minimum course load for both terms, so there is no averaging of course loads over an academic year in order to qualify.⁸⁵

In addition, caring for a dependant requires a significant investment of time. This, along with time devoted to employment to overcome the financial obstacles imposed by a dependant, may make it difficult to participate in a standard academic program. When an individual with dependants is prevented from accessing or completing higher education, everyone involved in the dependency relationship feels the economic and social damage. In the short term, both the potential student and his or her dependants are denied access to a larger income level and the corresponding quality of life benefits. In the long term, the children of a parent who has not attended or completed PSE are less likely to attend themselves.

Mature Students

In OUSA's policy paper on mature students,⁸⁶ the following definition was used to categorize mature students: someone who is over 21 years of age at the commencement of their study, who has been away from formal schooling for a minimum of two years, and who has academic potential but may not meet the regular admission criteria of their institution.

Mature students are often highly motivated in their post-secondary studies, but they also have "multiple roles of responsibility, which carry considerable emotional and financial burdens."⁸⁷ They are more likely to be in married or common-law relationships than traditional students, and also more likely to have children.⁸⁸ Studies have identified a range of barriers that may exist for mature students, including but not limited to: financial/ time constraints, pressure of family and work commitments, high tuition fees, limited course offerings, or courses offered at inconvenient times or locations, and entrance requirements, a barrier that may be compounded by a lack of recognition of a mature student's previous skills, experience or credentials.⁸⁹

Other barriers commonly cited include financial struggles, a lack of time, difficulty organizing and prioritizing, and difficulty balancing the need of family, home, partners and children with the demands of full- or part-time study.^{90,91} Interestingly, research indicates that the effect of enrolment in post-secondary education on familial relationships is more pronounced for women.⁹² Indeed, strained personal relationships among mature students as a direct result of balancing higher learning with other responsibilities were so pronounced in some instances that researchers have

⁸⁵ Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. *OSAP 2010-11 Student Eligibility and Financial Need Assessment Manual*. (Toronto: Student Financial Assistance Branch, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2010)

⁸⁶ Minniti, Sam. *Mature Students*. (Toronto: OUSA, 2012)

⁸⁷ Osborne, Marks, and Turner "Becoming a mature student: How adult applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education". *Higher Education* 48(1), 2004.

⁸⁸ Kerr, A. *Adult Learners in Ontario Postsecondary Institutions*. (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2011)

⁸⁹ Rubenson, K. and Desjardins, R. "The Impact of Welfare State Regimes on Barriers to Participation in Adult Education: A Bounded Agency Model". *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59 (3), 2009.

⁹⁰ Stone, C. "Listening to individual voices and stories – The mature age student experience." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 48(2), 2008.

⁹¹ Kirby, D., Curran, V., & Hollet, A. "Non-formal adult learning programs at Canadian post-secondary institutions: Trends, issues, and practices." *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* 35(2), 2009

⁹² Baxter, A., & Britton, C. "Risk, identity and change: Becoming a mature student." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 11(1), 2001.

documented terminated friendships and divorces.⁹³ In addition, as a result of increased personal and employment responsibilities, scheduling can also be a barrier to participation in post-secondary studies.⁹⁴ In fact, according to Statistics Canada, the most frequently cited barrier for mature students centred on scheduling time for education with family responsibilities and with work.⁹⁵

Due to the range of complex barriers that exist for mature students in accessing and succeeding within post-secondary education, OUSA has made a range of recommendations to address their unique needs, including but not limited to: improving access for mature students through bridging programs, integrating the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition process at Ontario's universities, improving the range of both academic and non-academic support services to mature students, improving the financial assistance available to mature and part-time learners, removing barriers in admissions policies and improving the provision of courses for part-time learners.

Visible Minorities

Researchers have found that after controlling for educational levels and income of parents, some immigrant groups have higher PSE participation rates than students born in Ontario, but some groups have lower participation rates. In particular, first and second generation immigrants of Caribbean, Latin American and East African origin have disproportionately low participation rates at both university and college.⁹⁶ While 42 per cent of Canadian-born students in the Toronto District School Board had gained admission to university following their final year of secondary school, only 12 per cent of Caribbean-born students did the same. Caribbean-born students also had the highest secondary school dropout rate at 45 per cent, followed by those of African origin at approximately 30 per cent.⁹⁷ Region-of-origin differences are most apparent within the university pathway, although youth from these groups were also less likely to participate in college.⁹⁸

Regardless of status as a recent immigrant or not, the racialization of some students has also had an influence on success at the secondary and post-secondary level. The lower achievement of many black students in the Greater Toronto Area has been a cause of concern for educators. Black students tend to have lower achievement and higher dropout rates than their counterparts. It has been suggested that this is partially due to socioeconomic marginalization, but also it has been raised that black students, and other students from visible minorities, may feel alienated by a Eurocentric curriculum that ignores diverse experience, culture and history.⁹⁹ In response to these higher drop-out rates, the Toronto District School Board established an Africentric Alternative school, which opened its doors at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year.¹⁰⁰ It remains to be

⁹³ Stone, C. "Listening to individual voices and stories – The mature age student experience."

⁹⁴ Kirby, Curran, & Holle. "Non-formal adult learning programs at Canadian post-secondary institutions: Trends, issues, and practices."

⁹⁵ Statistics Canada. *Access and Support to Education and Training Survey (ASETS), 2008 (No. 515)*. (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2009)

⁹⁶ Sweet, Anisef, Walters and Pythian. *Post-high school pathways of immigrant youth*.

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ Brown, R.S. *TDSB secondary student success indicators 2004-2005*. (Toronto: Toronto District School board, 2006)

⁹⁹ Fowzia, Mahamed. *There is no choice: examining Somali parents' experience with special education*. MA thesis. (Toronto: University of Toronto, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, 2010)

¹⁰⁰ Sweet, Anisef, et al. *Post-high school pathways of immigrant youth*.

seen whether this strategy is effective in reducing secondary school attrition rates and increasing the number of students that transition to post-secondary institutions.

Additionally, at the institutional level students from visible minority backgrounds may feel alienated from the broader student and faculty population, in terms of having divergent life experiences and also the assumptions that others may make about how some students qualified for admission. For example, while access programs that take into consideration racial, ethnic, disability and gender related barriers may raise university participation rates for these students, they can also lead to the characterization of these students as lacking the academic skills necessary to qualify for university based on merit. In other cases, students may feel that they do not fit with the dominant image of who a university student is, and that there is an implicit questioning of their presence on campus.¹⁰¹

Students with Disabilities

The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services has estimated that 15.5 per cent of people in Ontario have a disability.¹⁰² As part of the Province's commitment to improve the accessibility of Ontario by 2025 through the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2005 (AODA), the provincial government has taken steps to improve the accessibility of post-secondary education for students with disabilities.¹⁰³

However, studies have shown that young people with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in Ontario's post-secondary education system, particularly at the university level. Using data from the Youth in Transition survey, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario found that 68 per cent of young people identified had participated in some form of post-secondary education by the age of 21: this figure dropped to 22 per cent for university participation.¹⁰⁴ In comparing these numbers to the participation rates of non-disabled young people, significant gaps were revealed: 84 per cent of non-disabled young people had participated in post-secondary (16 point gap), and 49 per cent had enrolled at university (27 point gap). The university participation rate for young disabled people in Ontario was also lower than the Canadian average of 26 per cent.¹⁰⁵

It is important to note that under the umbrella term of 'disability' there are an array of physical, mental, learning and health impairments or conditions that may be present. Research has shown that the educational attainment for different groups of people with disabilities can vary wildly. As Figure 6¹⁰⁶ shows, people with only physical disabilities have higher levels of educational attainment than for people with other types of disability, although for all types of disability educational attainment rates are less than for people who are not disabled.

¹⁰¹ James, Carl E. and Celia Haig Brown. "Returning the Dues' Community and the Personal in a University-School partnership" *Urban Education* 36, no.2, 2001.

¹⁰² Ministry of Community and Social Services. *About the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA)* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2012) <http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/publications/accessibility/aoda2005.aspx>

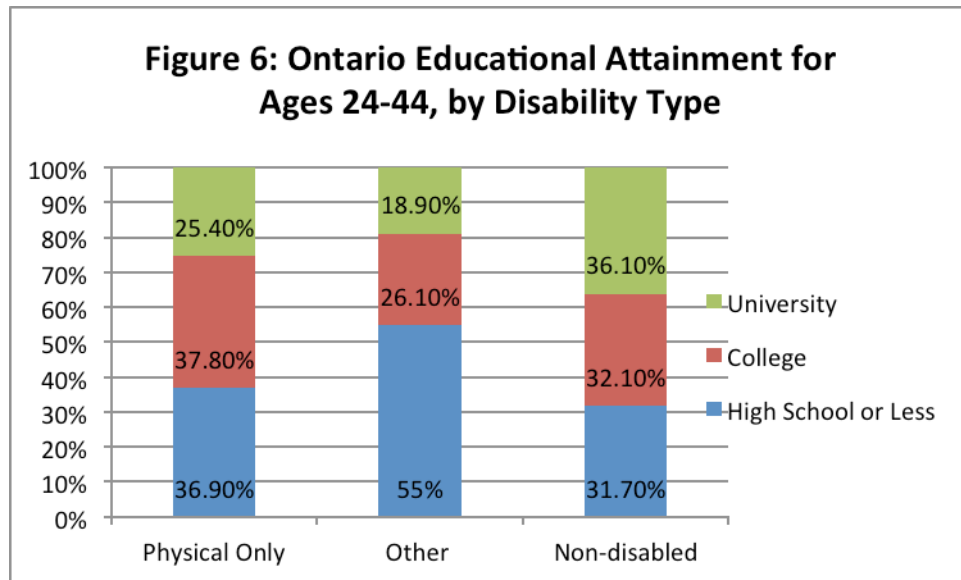
¹⁰³ McCloy, Ursula & Lindsay DeClou. *Disability in Ontario: Post-secondary education participation rates, student experience and labour market outcomes*. (Toronto: HEQCO, 2013)

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ Based on data and charts from McCloy & DeClou. *Disability in Ontario*

Figure 6: Ontario Educational Attainment for Ages 24-44, by Disability Type¹⁰⁷



In addition to facing barriers in accessing post-secondary education, students with disabilities may face additional barriers in being able to successfully complete their post-secondary education: 22 per cent of persons with disabilities reported having to discontinue their education as a result of their condition.¹⁰⁸

In OUSA's dedicated policy on Students with Disabilities,¹⁰⁹ students called for a comprehensive strategy to improve the opportunities for students with disabilities to be able to access and succeed at post-secondary education. This included advocating for: improved data and research to better inform outreach and provision of services for young people with disabilities; improvement of the financial assistance available to students with disabilities; improving campus accessibility in line with AODA; improving campus support systems and transition programs; and improving staff and faculty training at institutions as a means to eliminate stigma for students needing to access services.

LGBTQ Students

Students recognize that young people identifying as LGBTQ face a range of barriers in accessing post-secondary education. While a lack of data exists charting the experiences of LGBTQ students in Canada, studies undertaken by Egale: Canada Human Rights Trust found that safety issues pose a significant barrier for LGBTQ youth in high school. 64.2 per cent of LGBTQ students reported feelings of not being safe in their high school

¹⁰⁷ Adapted from a chart which appears in McCloy & DeClou, *Disability in Ontario*. This chart is drawing on data collected by Statistics Canada which defines categories of disability in the following way. "Physical Only" comprises hearing, seeing, mobility, pain, and communication. "Other" comprises learning, memory, developmental, and psychological, or a combination of one or more of these, or one of more of these with a physical disability.

¹⁰⁸ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Participation and activity limitation survey (PALS)*. Catalogue no. 89-628-X

¹⁰⁹ Nicholls, Steven & Alysha Li *Students with Disabilities* (Toronto: OUSA, 2012)

environment, in comparison to only 15.2 per cent of non-LGBTQ students. This gap widened for trans* students, 78 per cent of whom felt unsafe in some way at school.¹¹⁰

Verbal harassment is a frequent reality of life for LGBTQ high-school students. Sometimes this harassment is not directed at a particular individual, but rather takes the form of a homophobic slur. 70.4 per cent of high school students surveyed indicated that they heard the expression “that’s so gay” daily, while 47.5 per cent indicated that they heard remarks like “faggot” “lezbo” or “dyke” at least daily. 39.9 per cent of students heard these slurs at least weekly. Only 20.6 per cent of students indicated that they encountered them rarely or never.¹¹¹

A U.S study found that LGBTQ youth were more likely to skip school (be absent without permission) than straight youth. Students were asked how many unauthorized absences they had taken in the last four weeks: for straight youth, the overall truancy rate was 13.9 per cent, whilst for LGBTQ youth this figure was 21.1 per cent. The truancy rates for trans* youth were particularly high, with almost 6 per cent of trans* youth reporting they had missed 5 or more days of school in the last month.¹¹² Particularly sobering is the figure that LGBTQ youth are over four times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-LGBT peers, a direct result of mistreatment, isolation or rejection from certain segments of their communities.¹¹³

These barriers can persist into post-secondary education. According to a survey of Canadian universities, within the past year 51 per cent of LGBTQ students hid their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid discrimination, 36 per cent experienced harassment, and 20 per cent were concerned about their physical safety because of their sexual orientation or gender.¹¹⁴ Almost half of the respondents found the overall campus environment homophobic, and felt that they were less accepted than their heterosexual peers.^{115, 116} The non-acceptance many LGBTQ individuals experience at their post-secondary institution can lead to many negative consequences. On an academic level, it can reduce student success, and also lead to lower post-secondary completion rates and higher attrition rates. On a personal level it can contribute to increased stress, low self-esteem and internalized victimization, all of which are associated with an increased experience of depression, substance abuse and suicide.¹¹⁷

As well as the academic and motivational barriers faced by LGBTQ youth, some LGBTQ youth may face additional financial barriers in accessing post-secondary education. Students come from a variety of backgrounds, and not all are equally accepting of LGBTQ youth.¹¹⁸ As well as the emotional stress surrounding fear of familial rejection,

¹¹⁰ EGALÉ *LGBTQ Resource Guide* (Toronto: EGALÉ: Canada Human Rights Trust, 2013)

¹¹¹ *ibid*

¹¹² Robinson, Joseph P. & Dorothy L. Espelage. “Inequalities in Educational and Psychological Outcomes Between LGBTQ and Straight Students in Middle and High School” in *Educational Researcher* vol. 40 no.7 (Washington D.C: AERA, 2011)

¹¹³ EGALÉ. *LGBTQ Resource Guide*

¹¹⁴ Taylor, C & Peter, T., with McMinn, T.L., Elliott, T., Beldorn, S., Ferry, A., Gross, Z., Paquin, S., & Schachter, K. *Every class in every school: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools. Final report.* (Toronto, ON: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011)

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Waldo, C. R.. “Out on campus: Sexual orientation and academic climate in a university context.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(5), 1998.

¹¹⁷ Suicide Prevention Resource Center. *Suicide risk and prevention for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.* (Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc., 2008)

¹¹⁸ Ryan, C., Russell, S.T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R., & Sanchez, J. “Family acceptance in Adolescence and health of LGBT young adults.” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(4), 2010

students may be financially reliant on the parents to contribute to the cost of post-secondary education, which may lead to students hiding their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This can lead to severe anxiety and stress, as individuals should exercise constant vigilance in their day-to-day life to avoid detection, refrain from dating, and avoid participation in supportive LGBTQ communities and associations.¹¹⁹ Conversely, LGBTQ youth who do disclose their status to family members can face rejection, discrimination, and a loss of emotional and financial support.¹²⁰

Students believe that LGBTQ youth should be supported to succeed in their educational pursuits, through primary, secondary and into post-secondary education. This would require significant action to mitigate the barriers that currently may prevent the success of LGBTQ students.

Francophone Students

611,500 people or 4.8 per cent of Ontario's population is francophone, representing the largest francophone population in Canada outside of Quebec.¹²¹¹²² Francophones in Ontario are primarily concentrated in Eastern Ontario (42.2 per cent), Central Ontario (30 per cent) and North-Eastern Ontario (20.8 per cent). However, minority francophone populations do reside in Southwestern Ontario (5.7 per cent) and Northwestern Ontario (1.2 per cent).¹²³

However, despite the significant and widely dispersed francophone population in Ontario, and the popularity of French immersion programs in K-12 education, there are limited options for Ontarian students wishing to study at post-secondary level in French. French language programs exist at the following publicly funded universities: University of Ottawa, Laurentian University, and Glendon Campus at York University, while private universities (such as Saint Paul University, Sudbury University and l'Université de Hearst) also offer French language programs.¹²⁴ Given the importance that distance has on impacting decisions about post-secondary education,¹²⁵ and the limited provision of French language programs in Ontario, it is perhaps unsurprising that many Francophone students are unable to enroll in French language programs.

As well as the lack of adequate program provision for Francophones, Francophone students may face cultural challenges if enrolling at a non-Francophone school, particularly if there is a lack of French student life or cultural activities available on campus, or if they feel removed from the Francophone community at home.¹²⁶

Announcements by the Provincial Government of new funding to encourage the expansion of francophone programming¹²⁷ and to extend the Ontario Distance Grant to assist OSAP

¹¹⁹ Harper, G.W., & Schneider, M. "Oppression and discrimination among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and communities: A challenge for community psychology." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(3/4), 2003.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Office of Francophone Affairs. *Portrait of the Francophone Community in Ontario*. (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2011) Available online: <http://www.ofa.gov.on.ca/en/franco.html>

¹²² Office of Francophone Affairs. *Data based on the Inclusive Definition of Francophone from the 2011 Census*. (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2013) Available online: <http://www.ofa.gov.on.ca/en/franco-census-2011.html>

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Hillyer, Rebecca. *Etudiez en Français!... En Ontario?* (Toronto: OUSA, 2013) Available online: <http://www.ousa.ca/2013/06/24/etudiez-en-francais-en-ontario/>

¹²⁵ Frenette. *Too far to go on? Distance to school and university participation*.

¹²⁶ Pilote, A. (2013). Student mobility and the Canadian Francophone. *Critical Perspectives on International Education*. 223- 227

¹²⁷ Government of Ontario. News Release: *Expanding French Postsecondary Education* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2013). Available online: <http://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2013/10/expanding-french-postsecondary-education.html>

eligible Francophone students¹²⁸ to assist with the travel costs of pursuing a French language program anywhere in Ontario were welcome first steps in improving the access to post-secondary education for these students. However, more needs to be done in order to address the barriers facing Francophone and bi-lingual students wishing to pursue their education in French.

Crown Wards

Improving education and employment outcomes for youth leaving care has been identified as a priority for the Ontario government.¹²⁹ Many young people leaving care face significant educational barriers: only 44 per cent of youth in care graduate high school (compared to 82 per cent of youth in the general Ontario population). Youth in and from care are over-represented in the youth justice system, and are at a higher risk of homelessness. Aboriginal young people face additional challenges in the care system, and are more likely to be in contact with the child welfare system in the first place: while Aboriginal people make up just 2 per cent of Ontario's population, Aboriginal children and young people account for 22 per cent of Ontario's Crown Wards.¹³⁰

In recognition of the barriers Crown Wards face in accessing post-secondary education, the provincial government announced the 100% Tuition Aid For Youth Leaving Care Program in 2013. Under this program the Province will cover 50 per cent of a Crown Ward's tuition, with universities and participating colleges covering the remaining 50 per cent up to a maximum of \$6000 per year. In addition, the Province has committed to extending the length of the existing Living and Learning Grant, providing Crown Wards \$500 per month until the age of 24 to assist with their living expenses during their studies.¹³¹

Students welcome these measures to reduce the financial barriers facing Crown Wards' ability to access post-secondary education. However, given the low-levels of high school attainment for this group, students believe that a comprehensive access strategy should include early outreach to ensure Crown Wards are supported to complete their primary and secondary education successfully, and feel supported and informed when making their decisions about post-secondary destinations.

¹²⁸ *ibid*

¹²⁹ Ministry of Children and Youth Services *Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Welfare System* (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2013) Available online: <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/childrensaid/childrensaidsocieties/reports/youthleavingcare.aspx>

¹³⁰ *ibid*

¹³¹ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, *Press Release: Provincial Government and Universities to Cover Tuition Costs for Crown Wards, Students Respond* (Toronto: OUSA, 2013) Available online: <http://www.ousa.ca/2013/06/25/press-release-provincial-government-and-universities-to-cover-tuition-costs-for-crown-wards-students-respond/>

SECTION FOUR: BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Concern One: There is currently very little focus within the post-secondary education sector of Ontario to create a unified access strategy that addresses the barriers that underrepresented groups experience.

The Ontario Government is undoubtedly committed to enhancing access to post-secondary education in Ontario. However, the approach is disjointed, split between many different ministries and initiatives governed separately. For example, a listing on the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities' website highlights results from the Reaching Higher plan, which demonstrates initiatives across several ministries, many post-secondary institutions, and other agencies.¹³² In contrast, the United Kingdom has taken a jurisdiction-wide approach to widening participation, with the creation of national scholarship programs, a national access strategy, and research initiatives.¹³³ Additionally, the Stepping Up Plan from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services highlights a long list of initiatives intended to promote student success in education, training, and apprenticeships, coming from many ministries and agencies.¹³⁴

Without a comprehensive strategy to address issues of access in Ontario, this leaves programs and initiatives to the will of post-secondary institutions, non-profit agencies, and other groups who may not have the resources to share best practices, prevent overlapping initiatives, and ensure that the needs of a wide variety of underrepresented groups are met.

Concern Two: There are many underrepresented groups who experience multiple barriers (including but not limited to financial, motivational and informational, and academic barriers) to accessing post-secondary education.

There are a number of groups that experience barriers in access to post-secondary education. For the purposes of this paper, OUSA will focus on the following underrepresented groups: low-income students; aboriginal students; rural and northern students; first-generation students; students with dependents and mature students; students with disabilities; visible minority students; LGBTQ students; francophone students; and Crown Wards. The barriers faced by these students can be broadly categorized as financial, informational & motivational, and academic, but are not limited to these categories. Other forms of barriers may include institutional or geographic, for example. It is also worth noting that young people from underrepresented groups are likely to experience multiple and overlapping barriers, and barriers can interact with one another. For example, price sensitivity to the cost of a post-secondary education can be

¹³² Ministry of Trades, Colleges and Universities. *Reaching Higher*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2013) Available Online: <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/postsec/reachinghigher.html>

¹³³ Higher Education Funding Council for England. *Widening Participation*. (UK: HEFCE, 2013) Available online: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/>

¹³⁴ Ministry of Children and Youth Services. *Stepping Up*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer of Ontario, 2013) Available online: <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/youthopportunities/steppingup/education.aspx>

categorized as a financial barrier, but also overlaps with informational gaps about the long-term benefits of post-secondary education.

For some of the groups¹³⁵ discussed in this paper, OUSA has developed individual policies to address specific concerns. However, given the often over-lapping nature of these groups (for example, aboriginal students are also often likely to come from a low-income background) this paper continues to consider each of these underrepresented groups, specifically in the light of access.

Concern Three: For many underrepresented groups in Ontario there is a lack of data on post-secondary participation and attainment, preventing systems and resources to be put in place.

Part of addressing systemic barriers to participation in higher education is to fully understand the scope of issues facing particular groups of students. In Canada, including Ontario, information and research on a number of groups that students identify as underrepresented in higher education or facing unique barriers is lacking. This is mainly due to a lack of data collection and analysis on the demographic composition of secondary school students, post-secondary applicants, and post-secondary students. While many institutions collect basic demographic data on such factors as gender, citizenship, program of study, other key indicators relating to issues of access such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, First Nations/Metis/Inuit status, language of origin, and disability are often not collected (or may be subject to issues of unwillingness to self-identify due to fear of discrimination), and analyzed system-wide to understand patterns of institution and program choice. While the introduction of the Ontario Education Number¹³⁶ will begin the process of increasing the availability of data about education in Ontario, student believe there should be specific data collections made with regard to post-secondary attainment, that would better inform our understanding of post-secondary access.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Concern Four: Despite having access to funds to participate in PSE, many students continue to feel that the “benefits” of participating in PSE are not worth the upfront costs –in terms of initial financial obligations, time spent not working, and future levels of debt.

Studies indicate that regardless of improvements to the financial aid system, many students are still choosing to not attend post-secondary due to financial concerns. For some, the demonstrated benefits of attending post-secondary do not outweigh the cost of attending an institution. Aboriginal students, first-generation students and women may feel more strongly that the long term benefits do not weigh the upfront costs, as studies show that they are often more debt adverse.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Separate policy papers exist addressing issues for Rural and Northern Students, Students with Disabilities, Mature Students, and Aboriginal Students.

¹³⁶Ministry of Education. *Ontario Education Number*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2013) Available online: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/oen/>

¹³⁷ The Educational Policy Institute. *Access, persistence, and barriers in postsecondary education: A Literature Review and Outline of Future Research*. (Toronto, Ontario: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2008)

Further, it is well known that students from lower-income backgrounds, first generation students are more likely to over-estimate the costs of post-secondary and under-estimate the benefits. One study found that low-income students were likely to overestimate the costs of post-secondary by at least four times, and believed it to be \$7,000 more than low middle and high income students did.

Finally, a study by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA),¹³⁸ entitled “Illiteracy of the Literate,” found that 54 per cent of Canadian students (including students in upper-year university) failed a basic financial aid literacy test, demonstrating that students are not well informed about financial aid policies in Canada. Students who don’t have a concrete understanding of how to access aid and how much financial aid they can receive, may be more likely to have concerns about taking on debt in order to attend PSE.

Concern Five: Despite the demonstrated benefits of many university transition programs, the cost of these programs may act as a deterrent for students who may have been out of school for several years.

Students who do not enter PSE directly out of high school may face additional financial concerns which can deter students from applying. York University and U of T, for instance, offer transition programs for students who may not be able to fulfill the traditional admission requirements of the university. These programs are offered for a full year, and, once complete, students are able to enter directly into a first-year General Arts program. Since these programs are one year in length, OSAP is generally available for eligible students. Receiving OSAP, however, would add on an extra year of loans to students who already have an increased likelihood of taking more than 4 years to complete their degrees.

INFORMATIONAL/MOTIVATIONAL BARRIERS

Concern Six: There is insufficient information available to students, families and communities about education pathways, the costs and benefits of higher education, and available student financial aid.

Evidence suggests that guidance counsellors are not having a positive impact and potentially no impact at all on students seeking higher education. A report by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that only a minority of participants actually interacted with their guidance counsellor.¹³⁹ The study concluded that, despite the presence of guidance counsellors, many high school students felt anxious and unprepared to make decisions regarding their post-secondary options.¹⁴⁰ This problem is compounded by the fact that students and counsellors have very different concepts of ‘preparedness.’ A study conducted by the McGraw-Hill Foundation indicated that while counsellors consider college eligibility as a measure of student success, students were more concerned with the ability to meet the academic standards of college once they arrived.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. *The Illiteracy of the Literate: The lack of financial aid knowledge among Canadian university students*. (Ottawa, CASA, 2010)

¹³⁹ Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, “Fear of the unknown Due to a lack of information, many Canadian youth have anxieties about post-secondary education”, *CAP Journal*, (Montreal: CMSF, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*

¹⁴¹ McGraw-Hill Education, “McGraw-Hill Survey Provides Insight Into U.S. College and Career Readiness Issues,” *PR Newswire*.

Additionally, there have been concerns raised that high schools have been guiding students into preconceived paths of best-fit as opposed to individually appropriate pathways. Concerns indicate that some guidance programs may be streaming students away from the more rigorous high school courses, whereas others have felt that some high schools are guiding more students towards university.

Finally, it has been suggested that ineffective counselling on post-secondary education matters may be a result of counsellors spending the majority of their time helping students with more immediate and personal issues regarding drugs, gangs, health, and safety, especially in areas where youth face a wider array of personal challenges.

Concern Seven: Some underrepresented students may not have the necessary support and/or mentorship to encourage them to participate and excel in PSE.

Parents, mentors and support systems can play a huge part in determining whether or not a student will attend PSE. In a survey conducted by studentawards.com, 51.1 per cent¹⁴² of survey respondents reported that their parents were the most influential in their decision to attend PSE. Parental attitudes and knowledge of PSE can drastically effect a student's decision about their path forward.

Further, whether or not a student's parents have attended PSE themselves can deeply affect whether or not the student will chose to attend. Research by Turcotte¹⁴³ indicates that parental education is one of the main contributing factors for predicting whether a young person will participate in PSE. In a 2009 study, results demonstrated that in families in which parents did not complete high school, only 10 per cent of males and 16 per cent of females attained a university degree. In contrast, in families where both parents held a university degree, 66 per cent of males and 77 per cent of females had at least a university degree.

It has been made evident that parents are extremely influential in most cases and their level of education will most likely play into the likelihood of their child attending PSE. Students who do not have the support of their parents, or who have parents who did not attend PSE are at a much higher risk of not accessing education past high school.

Concern Eight: There is a stigma associated with seeking advice from a guidance counsellor in secondary school, which can lead many students needing assistance to not seek advice about post-secondary education.

In a study of two high schools in Southern Ontario researchers found that students preferred to speak with their family and friends for career-related matter and, moreover, that females were more likely to consult a guidance counsellor for both academic and career related matters, compared to males.¹⁴⁴ As males are currently lagging behind females in terms of enrolment into university, this fact is particularly disconcerting.

¹⁴² StudentAwards Inc. *Path from High School to Higher Education: Insights into Student and Parent Decision-Making*, 2012. (Toronto: StudentAwards Inc., 2012)

¹⁴³ Turcotte, M. *Intergenerational education mobility: University completion in relation to parents' education level*. Component of *Statistics Canada Catalogue*: 11-008-X. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2011)

¹⁴⁴ Domene, J., Shapka, J., & Keating, D. Educational and career-related help-seeking in high school: An exploration of students' choices. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*. 40(3), 2006.

CASA's 2010 "Illiteracy of the Literate" survey found that only 20 per cent of university students used guidance counsellors as a primary source for financial aid information. By comparison, a vast majority used parents (51.4 per cent) and friends (57.2 per cent) as major sources of information. Similar trends can also be found at a secondary-school level.¹⁴⁵

By not seeking out advice from guidance counsellors, students can be missing out on important information about PSE, debt and financial aid. Guidance counsellors, with proper support and training, can be a good source of information for students to gain information to make educated decisions. Further, they can be key for students who may not have parental support or support from other mentors in making their decisions.

Concern Nine: Guidance counsellors may be spending the majority of their time helping students with personal issues, impacting their ability to provide careers and post-secondary pathways advice.

Due to the complex personal issues many young people face during high schools, guidance counsellors should be available to help address personal, mental and physical well-being. However, given the time needed to focus on such issues, guidance counsellors currently often do not have the capacity to focus on post-secondary related advice. Further, guidance counsellors who are dealing with complex personal issues may not be able to dedicate time to learning and understanding careers and post-secondary education, and so may be unable to provide detailed information to their students on how to access post-secondary education.

ACADEMIC BARRIERS

Concern Ten: Students from underrepresented groups are often at risk of lower levels of academic achievement in primary and secondary school.

While more research needs to be conducted on the impact of systemic barriers and academic achievement, existing studies suggest that low-income youth have lower measured achievement during high school, evidenced by lower overall grade averages and poorer scores on standardized reading, mathematics and sciences tests.¹⁴⁶ Several factors unrelated to innate ability contribute to these results, including motivational barriers, such as friends who do not intend to pursue higher education and parents who do not expect their children to attend PSE, and structural barriers, like attending lower quality schools.¹⁴⁷ Parental attitudes towards PSE may be the most salient barrier for first generation students, as these parents have limited experience with PSE that may contribute to a lack of support in the home environment for strong academic achievement.

Lower levels of academic achievement often lead students to self-select themselves out of the academic credits needed to continue on the pathway to university or college.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, there is a concern that guidance counsellors and academic advisors may reinforce this self-selection, steering low-income students away from the more rigorous

¹⁴⁵ CASA. *The Illiteracy of the Literate*.

¹⁴⁶ Frenette, *Why Are Youth from Lower-income Families Less Likely to Attend University?*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*

¹⁴⁸ Usher & Junor, *The Price of Knowledge* (2004)

courses required for university admittance. Further contributing to lower academic achievement is the fact that many students from lower income families are required to take on part-time employment while they are in high school in order to help support their families. Research indicates that working more than 20 hours per week in the last year of high school reduces university participation, likely due to a corresponding reduction in study time.¹⁴⁹

Concern Eleven: Students from some underrepresented groups often are in applied streams in Ontario secondary schools.

A People for Education report¹⁵⁰ demonstrates that in high schools where the average family income was \$60,000 or less per year, the rate of participation in applied stream mathematics was 60 per cent, compared to neighbourhoods where the average family income was \$100,000 or more, where the rate of participation in applied math was less than 20 per cent. Further, in 10 per cent of the schools with the highest concentration of students taking applied mathematics in Grade 9, students were more like to have parents who did not complete high school, more likely to be Aboriginal and more likely to be English-language learners, in comparison to the 10 per cent of schools with the lowest concentration.

Concern Twelve: The Ontario secondary school curriculum introduces academic streaming prior to students making educated choices about course selection, impacting their potential post-secondary pathways.

According to an article comparing Ontario and Ireland's post-secondary education systems, Ontario's secondary school curriculum where students choose academic or applied/vocational courses determines whether they are university or college-bound.¹⁵¹ However, in many cases students are choosing the level of these courses towards the end of their grade 8 year, far in advance of the mandatory Careers Studies course that students enroll in for their Grade 10 year.¹⁵² The concern in this instance is that students have made decisions about their course selection that will directly impact their post-secondary pathway, far in advance of when they are given the opportunity to explore career options and the mandatory post-secondary requirements to achieve those goals.

Concern Thirteen: Transferring between applied and academic streams is very difficult due to the limited availability of transfer credits, the undesirable times these courses are offered, and the cap on the number of secondary school credits a student may receive.

Unfortunately, it is both rare and difficult for students to transfer from applied to academic streams. According to the same People for Education report, 91 per cent of principals report students transfer from applied to academic courses "never" or "not very

¹⁴⁹ Mueller, "Access and Persistence of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds in Canadian Post-Secondary Education: A Review of the Literature"

¹⁵⁰ People for Education. *The Trouble with Course Choices in Ontario High School: Should Low-income = Applied?* (Toronto: People for Education, 2013) Available online: <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/trouble-with-course-choices-in-high-school-2013.pdf>

¹⁵¹ Cheng-Hoy. April. "Underrepresented groups in post-secondary education in Ontario and the Republic of Ireland" in *College Quarterly* Fall 2012 vol. 15 no. 4

¹⁵² Ministry of Education. *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 and 10: Guidance and Career Education*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2006)

often.” Ministry policy requires students to complete transfer courses to move from applied courses to academic courses at the next level¹⁵³, however many schools do not offer these courses during school hours, these courses are often offered during the summer or in night school. In fact, 34 per cent of schools report that they require students to take a transfer course, but of those who require the transfer course, 81 per cent do not offer one during school hours.¹⁵⁴

Concern Fourteen: The options available for students with insufficient credits or inadequate averages to transfer into PSE are limited and information on these programs tends to be inaccessible and decentralized.

Transition programs are set up at some institutions to support adults who do not have the formal qualifications for university admission, but may have faced or continue to face social or financial barriers and choose to pursue a university education. Examples of this type of program are currently offered by the University of Toronto¹⁵⁵ and York University¹⁵⁶. What is concerning is the lack of availability of these programs province-wide, and the decentralized information relating to these programs. Adults who may be interested in pursuing university may find it difficult to participate in these programs due to geographic barriers or due to lack of knowledge of their existence.

Concern Fifteen: Students may have experience that is unrecognized in the university applications and admissions process.

Many students, whether through necessity or choice, may have engaged in out-of-classroom experiences such as co-op, work, or volunteerism. Currently, on mass, the university applications and admissions process does not recognize when considering prospective students.

A student who must, or chooses to engage in out-of-classroom experience, may experience an effect on their academics due to this extra commitment. For example, a student who needs to maintain a job throughout high school may see negative impact on their academic performance due to the hours they are required to work, however still gain valuable skills and knowledge from this experience will. As the system is currently set up, there is no way to evaluate these additional skills and learning experiences in regards to the applications and admissions process.

¹⁵³ Government of Ontario. *Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Policy and Program Requirements*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2011)

¹⁵⁴ People for Education. *The Trouble with Course Choices in Ontario High School: Should Low-income = Applied?*

¹⁵⁵ University of Toronto. *Transitional Year Program* (Toronto: U of T, 2011) Available online: <http://www.utoronto.ca/typ/>

¹⁵⁶ York University. *Transition Year Program* (Toronto: York U, 2013) Available online: <http://futurestudents.yorku.ca/transitionyear/>

SECTION FOUR: POLICIES & PROGRAMS TO ENHANCE ACCESS

Recommendation One: The provincial government should implement a comprehensive access strategy to foster increased participation of underrepresented groups in all types of post-secondary education.

The provincial government should implement holistic access strategy that starts early in a student's life and continues on through their elementary, secondary, and finally, post-secondary academic life. If the government expects to reach its goal of at least 70 per cent participation in higher education, it should actively assist students from underrepresented groups in overcoming financial, informational, motivational, geographic, physical, social, structural and academic barriers. These initiatives should be multi-faceted and multi-focused, and can be delivered through a variety of approaches. Packaging initiatives so that programs address multiple barriers simultaneously is the most effective way of increasing PSE participation.¹⁵⁷

A comprehensive outreach strategy needs to stem from the government, in conjunction with communities, institutions, non-profits, and other stakeholders. A degree of freedom should be afforded to individual communities and institutions when it comes to designing outreach programs. Community organizations have firsthand knowledge of the challenges their youth face and how best to overcome them. Institutions are well positioned to find and address the barriers underrepresented groups face when attending their institution. However, students believe the provincial government should play an instrumental role in coordinating, funding, and evaluating these programs to ensure the success of these initiatives.

A comprehensive access strategy should include the following components:

1. Early Outreach Programs

Community- and school-based early outreach initiatives have shown recent success in increasing participation rates among many of these underrepresented groups. Early outreach programs vary in scope, from one-day programs to comprehensive packages that take a holistic approach, often providing a combination of academic support, pathways counselling and financial aid, through the creation of long-term relationships. While OUSA supports institutions' provision of one day campus visits, too often these opportunities are limited to a handful of students in a school:¹⁵⁸ students believe that all young people should have the opportunity to visit a post-secondary campus in Grade 9 or 10.

In addition, OUSA believes the Ontario government should adequately fund and support longer-term community-based early outreach initiatives across the province, and that these should be specifically targeted to underrepresented groups. These programs can provide assistance and resources to students, families, and communities in their preparation and pursuit of higher education.

Recommendation Two: Early outreach programs should be tailored to the

¹⁵⁷ Cunningham, Redmond, and Merisotis, *Investing Early Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*

¹⁵⁸ Rural and Northern Focus Group, McMaster University, October 28, 2010.

unique needs of a community and coordinated to ensure that community plans effectively support the programs.

While the provincial government has the obligation to fund and provide the broad infrastructure for early outreach programs, programs supported and administered through the local community have demonstrated higher success rates.¹⁵⁹ Post-secondary education institutions, not-for-profit groups and school boards all have a vested interest in supporting improved higher educational outcomes for their youth.¹⁶⁰ Working in a coordinated way with various Ministries – Ministry of Training, Colleges, and University, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, and the Ministry of Community and Social Services – at the local level will allow the programs to address many community needs at the same time.

However, it should also be recognized that different communities have varied capacity to create and support programs of this nature. The provincial government, through its ministries, has an obligation to build and nourish capacity where it does not exist and create the infrastructure necessary to ensure the success of early outreach programs.

Recommendation Three: Early outreach programs need to combine social and academic supports through a blend of mentoring, tutoring and other engagement activities to ensure academic success of students in early outreach programs.

Both social and academic supports are important in improving the success of underrepresented groups in accessing the PSE system. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, including through the support of peer mentors and the mentoring of post-secondary students and graduates. Oftentimes, lack of confidence, as a result of a number of life circumstances, can have an impact on students and their tendencies to “self-select” themselves out of post-secondary. Personal enrichment activities can help to build confidence and identify passions, interests and skills, thus helping to determine educational pathways.¹⁶¹ For example, the Women in Skilled Trades & Technology Day at Humber College connects younger students to mentors who can serve as both informational resources and guides through various education pathways.¹⁶² To help address concerns around lower levels of academic achievement for underrepresented groups, early outreach programs should also provide tutoring programs to support students. In particular, higher education institutions and local school boards have the ability to coordinate the development of programs to support students academically.

Recommendation Four: The government should look to the successful Pathways to Education Canada model when exploring community driven outreach programs and expanding access to the program within Ontario.

There has been success shown in programs that offer a combination of academic and informational support services, financial incentives, parental involvement activities, mentoring, and personal and social enrichment activities.¹⁶³ All of these methods are

¹⁵⁹ Cunningham, Redmond and Merisotis, *Investing Early: Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*

¹⁶⁰ University of Toronto, “Appendix D: Access and Outreach Programs at the University of Toronto”, in *The Choice for a Generation: Investing in Higher Education and Ontario’s Future* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004).

¹⁶¹ Cunningham, Redmond and Merisotis, *Investing Early: Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*

¹⁶² Humber School of Applied Technology, “Women in Skilled Trades & Technology Day” (Toronto: Humber College, 2005).

¹⁶³ Cunningham, Redmond and Merisotis, *Investing Early: Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*

valid and programs should be designed with the purpose of combining some or many of these elements tailored in response to the specific needs of the target community.

The Pathways to Education Canada model is based on four pillars including tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and financing. Participants receive immediate financing in the form of bus tickets and meal vouchers to encourage students to stay in school. In addition, students who advance through the program earn funds that can be put towards their post-secondary schooling.

The initial Pathways to Education Canada location in Regent Park, Toronto, experienced significant successes. For the first five cohorts, there was a 79 per cent average reduction in dropout rates, and a doubling of high school graduation rates.¹⁶⁴ Students involved in the project have praised the program's inclusive approach, and ability to empower and inform about the possibilities of higher education.¹⁶⁵ The successes of Pathways to Education Canada have been well noted by both the provincial and federal governments, and led to the expansion of the project to 12 areas across Canada (including 8 Ontario communities). OUSA commends the provincial and federal governments for its financial support of Pathways to Education Canada, but notes that this funding accounts for only 50 per cent of the programs budget. Indeed, there is significant evidence that Pathways is a sound investment on the part of the government. In its 2011 assessment of the program, the Boston Consulting Group estimated the long-term benefit to society for every dollar invested in Pathways was \$24 and the cumulative lifetime benefit to society of a student enrolled in Pathways is \$600,000.¹⁶⁶

As a result of the considerable success of the Pathways program, OUSA recommends that the provincial government continues the expansion of the program across Ontario and use its model as an outline when developing a holistic approach to early outreach.

Recommendation Five: Institutions should focus on developing partnerships with local organizations that already have relationships with young people from underrepresented communities (such as employment centres, youth groups, Aboriginal elders, etc.) for the purposes of information-sharing on post-secondary pathways.

Often there are groups working within communities who already work with young people and can better disseminate information than if a new program was created by an institution.

For example, Frontier College is a Canadian organization that focuses on national literacy development. As part of their mandate, they conduct homework/mentoring clubs with youth from underrepresented groups – including elementary schools and family shelters. Many of Frontier College's services are run by student volunteers from various university campuses; and part of the programs entail bringing the children/youth to local campuses to give them a glimpse of life at university. Thus, the benefits of the program are two-fold: children are able to have one-on-one learning opportunities from a university-student mentor, *and* they have the unique opportunity to visit a university campus at a young age. Further, the Pathways to Education Canada

¹⁶⁴ Deller, & Tomas. *Strategies for supporting youth education: A snapshot of early intervention programs in Ontario*. (Toronto: HEQCO, 2013)

¹⁶⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶⁶ The Boston Consulting Group, *BCG Assessment of Pathways to Education Executive Summary*, 2011.

program works to provide students with academic, social and financial support as well as 1 on 1 mentoring.

Other community based organizations such as local Aboriginal Centres, community groups which focus on marginalized students like LGBTQ support groups or local programs that offer support for low-income students could be partnered with in order to decimate information about PSE, debt, financial literacy etc. In this way, the group would already be a captive audience and would be able to access resources through an organization which they already know and trust.

2. Primary and Secondary Education

i. Counselling and Student Success Teams

A more effective guidance counsellor and student success network is needed within Ontario's high schools. It is important that student success teams – guidance counsellors, teachers, and principals – are equipped with correct financial aid information and sufficient institution-specific information to adequately guide every student. Within the guidance program, the provincial government should ensure that no biases or omissions of information systemically influence students' decisions regarding PSE.

Given that youth in some areas face greater challenges and place higher demand on guidance programs, it is recommended that guidance counsellors be allocated to schools through a needs-based approach, rather than solely based on the number of students. In addition, the provincial government should work in cooperation with local school boards to develop an appropriate strategy to disseminate accurate information to parents, including details about financial aid and the different pathways to PSE available to students.

ii. Curriculum to improve pathway planning and financial aid literacy

For a system-wide access strategy to work, it is important that accurate information is made available to youth and other groups that influence students' PSE decisions, including parents and guidance counsellors. Through the Ministry of Education, curriculum should be introduced at the high-school level that provides training on personal financial management, the benefits of university, college, and the skilled trades, and specific details on the financial aid available to students pursuing each of these PSE pathways. Additionally, the high school curriculum should also be altered to integrate relevant information about various career choices and opportunities into all courses.

iii. Enrichment programs for underrepresented groups

In addition to equipping underrepresented youth with the information they need to perceive PSE as a beneficial and achievable pathway, it is important to provide students with enrichment programs. These programs can help students succeed in PSE by providing them with exposure to post-secondary institutions and different career paths from a young age. Early credit and dual credit opportunities offer university or college level courses to high school students. The objective is to reduce the perceived barriers among underrepresented groups. By taking a post-secondary class at an early age, students gain familiarity with the campus setting and an awareness that they can succeed within the academic standards of post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, students

who participate in early and/or dual credit programs often report that they are more motivated than their peers to achieve the academic requirements necessary for post-secondary entry.¹⁶⁷ Similar to early credit and dual credit programs, high school co-op programs enable a student to test out the skills they learn in school in a real work environment. Co-op programs show students that a career path is obtainable and motivate students to pursue PSE pathways that suit their long-term career interests.

Recommendation Six: Each secondary school should have at least one certified Career Development Practitioner on-staff within their guidance counselling team.

Currently, guidance counselling is funded on a per pupil basis, leaving fewer guidance counsellors in smaller schools, which can also tend to be located in rural or remote communities, or communities with significant numbers of underrepresented prospective students. Guidance counsellors tend to be professional teachers, and can spend significant portions of time supporting students with personal issues.

Students believe that an increased focus on support for careers and post-secondary pathways support can come from ensuring that each secondary school has at least one of their guidance counsellors certified as a Career Development Practitioner. This will ensure that students have access to a knowledgeable individual within their guidance team with the required credential, skills, and experience to provide adequate support.

Recommendation Seven: The process of guidance and counselling should seek to be less stigmatizing, by ensuring all students to set-up meetings with counsellors throughout high school, in order to ensure that they are personally prepared for their transition into post-secondary education, including advice about course streaming and selection in grade 9.

Currently, most Ontario schools have something called a “Student Success Team,”¹⁶⁸ which is composed of the school’s principal, (a) guidance counsellor(s), a student success teacher, and a special education teacher. However, this team is only meant to assist “students who are struggling, who need extra attention to help them graduate or are looking for new challenges in high school” .¹⁶⁹ Thus, unless a student is specifically identified to visit a member of the Student Success Team, it is unlikely that he or she will do so.

Starting in grade 9, all students should be required to schedule one-on-one meetings with a Career Development Practitioner. Students should be counseled on how to select courses and how this will affect their ability to attend PSE, PSE in general, financial aid, debt and other topics pertinent to PSE. By this mechanism, institutions will ensure that they are reaching out to all students, not just those that actively seek advice, and ensuring that they have the tools and information they need to make informed decisions.

Recommendation Eight: Guidance counsellors should receive regular skills updating, in regards to processes such as OSAP and financial aid, the

¹⁶⁷ Jamie Harrison, “Stepping Up,” *U of T Magazine*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, Winter 2006).

¹⁶⁸ Ministry of Education. *Student Success Teams* (Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2013) Available online: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/morestudentsuccess/teams.html>

¹⁶⁹ *ibid*

process of applying to PSE, and the secondary courses and grades required for university.

Guidance counsellors have the potential to be influential in a student's decision to attend PSE by providing correct information. Guidance counsellors are typically education professionals who take advanced qualification (AQ) courses to qualify for guidance positions. OUSA has been successful at working some familiarity of OSAP into these AQ courses. However, its impact has yet to be assessed.

Further, Ontario Secondary Schools are mandated to administer a "guidance curriculum" via a variety of avenues (guidance counsellor interactions, career classes, etc). One of the tenants is "financial literacy" which aims to make students aware of budgets, personal finance etc. However, it lacks a specific focus on OSAP, and how it can contribute to PSE transition.

OUSA believes that it is extremely important that guidance counsellors are educated fully in all aspects which could help a student make a decision about PSE such as financial aid, OSAP, debt and application requirements. Further, is important they regularly receive skills updating, as changes and requirements in the education sector and to programs such as OSAP are frequent.

Recommendation Nine: Primary and secondary schools should provide information and resources to students, families, and communities to assist in making better-informed decisions about educational pathways. These resources include, but are not limited to, improved guidance counselling, parental involvement activities, and curriculum changes.

The Canadian Student Survey found that, in addition to guidance counsellors, friends, families, and communities contribute to the decisions of students, and provide information students use to make PSE decisions.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, it is important that when developing a strategy of early outreach that students are offered assistance through their various support networks, and that the information that is disseminated is accurate, relevant, and non-biased.

Vital to this strategy is the incorporation of financial aid literacy in secondary school curriculum, and a revision of the career studies curriculum to emphasize the importance of pathway selection and provide the necessary resources for students to make educated decisions. Enhancing pathway resource centers in high school is another feasible method of improving the PSE resources available to students. The first step in addressing pathway resources is a critical review of high school Student Success Teams. As suggested elsewhere in this paper, the current of guidance counselling available in schools is insufficient to meet both the academic and social needs of students. Furthermore, there is evidence that the counselling that does exist does not properly prepare students for educational pathways.¹⁷¹

Furthermore, parents have a tremendous influence on their child's decision to attend higher education. In a 2009 study, the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation ranked parental education as one of the top factors influencing a youth's decision to

¹⁷⁰ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, *What Students Want: Results of the Ontario Student Survey*, (Toronto: OUSA, 2010)

¹⁷¹ People for Education, *The Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools* (Toronto: People for Education, 2006).

attend higher education, ahead of financial resources.¹⁷² The Ontario government should work with the school boards to develop strategies for educators (including principals, teachers and guidance counsellors) to educate and engage parents on the post-secondary options available to students. One possible strategy to begin improving parental engagement with PSE issues is to include a guide about financial aid and post-secondary pathways with all high school report cards. This is a simple and inexpensive way to tackle basic informational barriers.

Recommendation Ten: Dual credit programs in high schools should be funded and expanded within Ontario colleges and should be introduced, monitored and evaluated at the university level.

In this context, “dual credit” refers to programs that are specifically geared toward students at risk of not entering post-secondary education, which enable them to take college or apprenticeship-level courses for credit, while also receiving credit at the high school level. Dual credit programs introduce students to the more rigorous expectations of higher education while they are still able to take advantage of the more personal and individually tailored academic supports of secondary school. There are currently several such programs in Ontario, where students can take up to four credits that count at both the high school and college level. Within the next year 10,000 students are expected to participate in the program and every indication is that that number is will continue to rise.

Evidence demonstrates that dual credit programs can improve access to post-secondary education for students at risk of not graduating high school, students from groups underrepresented in higher education, and students with medium to low academic achievement.¹⁷³ A 2007 study by the Knowledge Works Foundation and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education declared that, “Allowing [high school] students to earn early college credit is an innovative policy to expand a state’s role in ensuring postsecondary access for more students.”¹⁷⁴ The experience of taking a class at the university or college level can prove to some students that they have the ability to succeed at the post-secondary level.¹⁷⁵ This experience can also provide other valuable information regarding the type of educational pathways that are open to students.

Dual credit programs can also enhance student engagement by providing a greater variety of courses, and courses geared towards students' specific career interests. These experiences are invaluable for at-risk students who might self select out of PSE.¹⁷⁶ Finally, a survey of American dual credit programs found that students from underrepresented groups who participated in dual credit programs performed better than their peers in their first year of college.¹⁷⁷ Dual credit programs, both improve the likelihood that students from underrepresented groups will graduate from high school, and also the odds that these students will succeed in their chosen post-secondary pathway.

¹⁷² Berger, Motte, and Parkin, *The Price of Knowledge* (2009).

¹⁷³ Elisabeth Barnett and Liesa Stamm, *Dual Enrollment: A strategy for Educational Advancement of All Students*. (Toronto: Blackboard Institute, July 2010).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ministry of Education, *Dual Credit Programs* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2010).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Barnett and Stamm, *Dual Enrollment*

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities should continue to develop, fund and expand dual credit programs with Ontario's colleges. As of now, students can only enrol if their high school is a participating member and the credit partnerships are at a limited number of institutions. In addition, the Ministry should look to expand dual credit programs to include opportunities for underrepresented youth to earn dual credit in the university environment. The primary function of all dual credit programs should be to motivate students, especially underrepresented students, to pursue higher education, and they should not be used as recruitment tools for post-secondary education institutions.

Recommendation Eleven: The Ministry of Education should phase out secondary school streaming.

According to a fact sheet developed by the Canadian Education Association and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, studies on ability grouping or "streaming" show inequitable outcomes and social consequences:

- "It is very difficult to distinguish 'ability' from 'prior achievement'
- Use of grouping by ability is associated with worse overall student performance
- Students placed in higher ability groups may perform better by students placed in lower ability groups typically perform worse than in mixed ability groups
- There is a tendency for lower teacher expectation and lower quality of instruction in lower ability groups
- For students assigned to low-ability groups, there are negative effects on their self-esteem, motivation and attitudes towards schooling."¹⁷⁸

Over the past thirty years, a substantial body of research from peer jurisdictions has accumulated demonstrating the negative impacts of streaming^{179 180 181}. Given this evidence, the Ministry of Education should phase out secondary school streaming. Students should be able to pursue diverse and multiple post-secondary pathways, based on changing goals and cultivated career interests, .

One example of how a high quality non-streamed high school system can work is the system currently used in British Columbia. High schools in British Columbia do not use a system of streaming: in order to graduate high school students must complete a total of 80 credits, combining required and elective courses.¹⁸² Within elective courses, the B.C. system provides a diverse course offering that allows students to tailor their education to their strengths. Elective credits can be gained through: in-class learning; equivalency (prior-documented learning); external credits (through membership of an external body, e.g: Cadets); Independent Directed Study; and Co-Op or industry training.¹⁸³ The B.C. has demonstrated the ability of non-streaming systems to support student success: B.C.

¹⁷⁸ Canadian Education Association and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. *The Facts on Education: "Should we be streaming students?"* (Toronto: CEA, 2010)

¹⁷⁹ People for Education. *The Trouble with Course Choices in Ontario High School: Should Low-income = Applied?*

¹⁸⁰ "Streaming in the 10th Grade in 4 Canadian Provinces" *Education Matters* 81-004-XIE (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2008)

¹⁸¹ Eder, D. (1981). Ability Grouping as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: A Micro-Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction. *Sociology of Education*, 54(3): 151-162.

¹⁸² British Columbia Education, Graduation Program Order (Vancouver: BCED, 2013)

¹⁸³ British Columbia Education, Grad Planner 2013/14 (Vancouver: BCED, 2013)

has the highest graduation rates for young adults (aged 20-24) in Canada, at 92.7 per cent.¹⁸⁴

Students believe that the Ministry of Education should responsibly introduce a non-streamed system in Ontario, ensuring that it addresses the needs of students in Ontario, and provides support for students, parents, and teachers in adapting to a new system.

Recommendation Twelve: The Ministry of Education, local school boards, and secondary schools should work collaboratively to ensure that all secondary students are able to pursue advanced placement programs.

Advanced placement programs such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and gifted programs offer students the opportunity to challenge themselves academically while, in many cases, offering opportunities to gain credit that will be transferable to post-secondary education and can be applied to programs at that level. It is important that all students who are willing have the opportunity to pursue these options, regardless of geography or size of their secondary school. These programs can be offered in diverse and multiple delivery formats including in-class, self-directed studies, and online formats. The Ministry of Education, local school boards, and secondary schools should determine the formats that best suit the needs of local secondary students and ensure that these are made available.

Recommendation Thirteen: Students should be advised more carefully about the implications of entering into different academic streams, beginning well in advance of selecting streamed courses, and transfer between applied and academic courses should be facilitated by access to transfer credits that can be taken during regular school hours.

While streaming between academic and applied courses remain in schools, attention must be paid to the difficulty of transferring between different academic streams later into secondary school. Efforts should be made to ensure that students are advised more carefully about the implications of entering whichever stream they choose. This is particularly relevant given the introduction of the new 34-credit cap in Ontario's schools,¹⁸⁵ which may make transferring between streams even more difficult.

In particular, the secondary school curriculum should make better use of careers counselling and the dedicated course in Careers Studies to ensure that students grasp the necessary secondary school prerequisites to be admitted to post-secondary programs that meet their career goals and objectives.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education should make efforts to support school boards and individual schools in ensuring that transfer courses are available to students who request them during regular school hours.

3. Pathway Mobility

For an access strategy to truly serve students, it is imperative that there is fluid mobility between different pathways, including between work, training, college and university.

¹⁸⁴ British Columbia Teacher's Federation, 2012 BC Education Facts (Vancouver: BCTF, 2012)

¹⁸⁵ Ontario Ministry of Education, *Four Year Secondary Program – Thirty-Four Credit Threshold* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 2013)

This is important because students from many underrepresented groups in PSE enrol in college at similar rates as their peers, but lag behind in accessing university. Consequently, if pathway mobility between college and university for qualified students were improved, this mechanism could be of critical importance in raising university participation rates in underrepresented groups. Improved pathway mobility between university and college could be achieved through credit transfer programs and a standardized recognition of academic merits across institutions.

Another way pathway mobility can be improved is through bridging programs. Bridging programs are designed for students who do not meet the requirements for entry into college or university. These programs differ in design, but they typically involve advanced academic support, reduced tuition, and often a chance to automatically enrol in the host institution upon completion of the program.

Recommendation Fourteen: The Ministry of Education should continue to develop enrichment programs such as co-op credits and high skills major programs that are designed to increase motivation and retention of students from underrepresented groups.

Many underrepresented students, especially first-generation students, underestimate the benefits of higher education.¹⁸⁶ Therefore, ‘reach ahead’ experiences that give students insight into experiencing fields of work that they may be interested in are important ways of improving student engagement with the education system. In addition to providing students with a chance to experience an occupational field, co-op and enrichment programs enable students to develop long-term relationships with people in their field. Such mentorships have been shown to be highly effective in improving enrolment rates in PSE.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, co-op credits and high skills major programs at the high school level help students focus on their post-secondary goals, appreciate the value of graduation, and educates students about the possibilities available in their sector when pursuing PSE pathway options.

Recommendation Fifteen: Bridging programs should be encouraged, funded, and evaluated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to help students with insufficient credits or inadequate entrance averages enter post-secondary education.

Bridging programs give students a chance to further their post-secondary education in an environment that allows them optimal support for their academic success. Designed for students who do not meet the requirements and entrance averages of colleges or universities, bridging programs typically include advanced academic support, reduced tuition, and a chance to apply to the host institution upon graduation.¹⁸⁸

Bridging programs are already in use on a small scale at institutions across Ontario. The University of Guelph, for example, offers the Open Learning Program that allows students open access to the university and guaranteed admission to degree programs

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Berger and Anne Motte, “Mind the Access Gap: Breaking Down Barriers to Post-Secondary Education,” *Policy Options* (Montreal, 2007).

¹⁸⁷ Cunningham, Redmond & Merisotis, *Investing Early: Intervention Programs in Selected U.S. States*

¹⁸⁸ Ryerson University. *Bridges to Ryerson helps adults start over*. (Toronto: Ryerson University, 2009) Accessed: http://www.ryerson.ca/news/news/General_Public/20090828_BridgesToRy.html.

once they have completed a number of prerequisites.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, the Bridges to Ryerson program offers preparation courses to mature students who lack the traditional entrance qualifications. The provincial government should expand the number of bridging programs as well as their availability to underrepresented students. Bridging programs facilitate the closing of participation gaps for students who have suffered academically at the secondary level, but have post-secondary aspirations.

Recommendation Sixteen: Transition programs should be encouraged, funded, and evaluated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and a provincial database should be created that would allow students to easily find transition programs within their area and which meet their individual needs.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities should incentivize the expansion of transition programs to ensure that capacity meets demand province-wide and support these programs through funding. Further, MTCU can sustain the longevity of these programs by evaluating them to ensure that transition programs all meet adequate standards of university-level preparation at all Ontario universities.

The Council of Educators of Toronto has developed a database of transition, bridging, and demographic-specific courses and programs available throughout Toronto¹⁹⁰. The Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities should look to develop a similar database for transition programs across the province.

4. Online Access

For students who cannot easily attend PSE because of a variety of reasons like distance or a demanding work schedule, online education is an alternative way to improve access. Online learning holds great potential to reduce financial, social, physical and geographical barriers to access. Ontario already has a number of online learning consortia and Ontario's post-secondary institutions offer many online courses. However, the availability of full degrees is limited, and methods of expanding online learning opportunities, including through the Ontario Online Institute, should be examined.¹⁹¹ In addition, it is important that Ontario's plan for online learning include full student support services for online learners, so these students have the assistance they need to succeed as students.

Recommendation Seventeen: As part of a comprehensive access strategy the government should continue to support online education programs.

In an effort to reach out to northern students, networks such as Contact North should continue to be funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The expansion of Contact North to remote and rural students through <http://studyonline.ca/> is an excellent example of how online programs can be far-reaching. In addition to increasing the variety of courses offered online, it is important to offer full information technology services to students, and ensure that online programs

¹⁸⁹ University of Guelph. *Open Learning Program* (Guelph: University of Guelph, 2010). Available online: <http://www.open.uoguelph.ca/prospective/open-learning/>.

¹⁹⁰ Council of Educators of Toronto. *Programs A-Z*. Available Online: <http://www.postsecondaryispossible.com/cet-program-search/english.html>

¹⁹¹ OUSA has dedicated policy on its vision for the future in its "Online Learning" policy paper.

are also provided with the proper IT support. For specific concerns and recommendations, see OUSA's policy on online education.¹⁹²

In addition to online initiatives, it is important to recognize that online services are not a substitute for in-person resources and outreach. Rural and northern communities should be designated areas in high need of guidance counsellors and student success teams in a needs-based allocation system. In addition, as many online students as possible should have the option of visiting a satellite learning centre, where students can use computer facilities, receive face-to-face counselling, sit final examinations, and gain a sense of community.

5. Student Financial Assistance

Cost aversion is still a major inhibitor for many first-generation and low-income students.¹⁹³ A report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario suggested that higher levels of targeted grants could encourage both low-income and first-generation students to participate in post-secondary education.¹⁹⁴ Some financial assistance in Ontario is targeted to students from underrepresented groups, including the bursaries for first-generation students and the Ontario Access Grant. However, Ontario continues to rank near the bottom of provinces on the percentage of financial assistance that is targeted and needs-based, and surveys have shown that students are generally unprepared to navigate the financial assistance system. Greater availability of loans and up-front, non-repayable grants would help to eliminate real and perceived barriers to accessing education.

Recommendation Eighteen: The government should continue to strengthen the student financial assistance system so all students can access post-secondary education.

OUSA recognizes and commends the provincial government for its improvements to the Ontario Student Assistance Program and its continued work to make loans and grants more accessible. However, with tuition highest average tuition in the country, it is more important than ever that Ontario's student financial assistance system is strengthened so that all students can access post-secondary education.¹⁹⁵ In recognition of the complex and extensive nature of the student financial aid assistance system it is advised that, for specific concerns and recommendations, one should refer to OUSA's policy paper on student financial assistance.

Recommendation Nineteen: Sector stakeholders should seek to demystify some of the beliefs held about post-secondary education, such as the availability of financial aid, job outcomes, debt levels, etc.

OUSA believes that it is important to deconstruct the false beliefs that many have about PSE and actively work to educate about the reality of the costs, availability of financial aid, managing debt, job outcomes and other important factors. In a small study

¹⁹² Condon Meghan, *Online Education*, (Toronto: OUSA, 2013).

¹⁹³ Palameta and Voyer, *Willingness to Pay for Postsecondary Education Among Underrepresented Group*

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁹⁵ Statistics Canada, *University Tuition Fees*, (Ottawa, Statistics Canada, 2010).

conducted by Oreopoulos and Dunn¹⁹⁶, a group of at-risk youth were shown a video about cost expectations and funding associated with participating in PSE. The study concluded that students who were shown the video were much more likely to have realistic expectations for costs and outcomes of PSE compared to the control group, who had the tendency to inflate costs and deflate value.

The need is evident to allow students access to these types of educational opportunities when they are making decisions about PSE in order to make informed choices. In British Columbia high school students can access a program called “Life After High School”, where they can easily receive information about PSE. Further, they can access a debt calculator and other services. Students believe that young people in Ontario should have access to a similar range of resources to help them in their decisions and financial planning for post-secondary education.

Recommendation Twenty: The secondary-school system should continue to teach best practices about being financially prepared for the costs of post-secondary education; including lessons about budgeting, applying for financial assistance, scholarships, etc. for both students and their families and/or guardians.

In the secondary school system, students are beginning to think about PSE earlier than ever before. Academic choices made as early as grade 9 can affect whether students will have sufficient credits to attend university: in effect they may be making the decision about if they will attend PSE in the future or not. For this reason, it is extremely important that students are provided with the information that they need at an appropriate time in their high school careers.

Students in Ontario are required participate in a Careers curriculum, which could be an ideal setting in which to disseminate information about their PSE options. Students believe that the Careers curriculum should be amended to include components on financial literacy, budgeting for post-secondary, and the range of assistance available to students entering post-secondary. This would allow students to gain a realistic understanding of their options and allow them to make more informed PSE choices. Further, by teaching this in the curriculum, it means that all students will have access to PSE information, not just those who are actively seeking it out.

Further, parents can play a key role in helping their student decide if they will attend PSE as well as helping them to understand finances and debt management. Often, in the last two years of high school, students and parents are encouraged to attend information sessions on PSE, in the form of a PSE fair, for example. However, because students have to make choices early in secondary school which will affect their ability to attend PSE, it is important that educational sessions for students and their families are available earlier in their careers. Holding sessions while students are younger, will mean that they will begin to better understand PSE at the same time that they are actually being forced to think about what track they are choosing to take.

Recommendation Twenty-One: The provincial government should set aside grant money that would specifically go towards providing financial

¹⁹⁶ Oreopoulos, P. & Dunn, R. (2012). Information and college access: Evidence from a randomized field experiment. NBER Working Paper Series: 18551. Available online: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18551>

assistance to students who would be required to take a transition program before entering a degree program.

Many students who enroll in transition programs are likely to be a part of underrepresented groups – including students from low-income families, mature students, students with dependents, Aboriginal students, students with disabilities, etc. It is important for the OSAP application process to recognize students who are applying specifically to transition programs in order to overcome barriers associated with enrolling directly in a first-year program.

Providing additional funding for transitional programs, and educating around the availability of this funding, could help to alleviate the concerns of students who need to attend these programs before starting their first year.

6. Applications & Admissions Systems

Part of the student arc from secondary school to post-secondary education is the applications and admissions process. Post-secondary institutions engage in a wide variety of marketing and recruitment strategies to ensure that students are made well aware of institutional cultures and program offerings, with the goal of meeting enrolment goals. Students believe that targeted outreach should be a part of a comprehensive strategy with the goal of increased participation among underrepresented groups. Application systems should engage in data collection at this point, not for the purposes of affirmative action, but for the purposes of understanding trends in post-secondary pathways and program selection for underrepresented groups so that targeted recruitment can be tailored for future years.

Recommendation Twenty-Two: The government should establish a centralized agency to assist public institutions with achieving goals to increase participation rates in higher education for underrepresented groups.

Students believe the provincial government should take a lead in coordinating an access strategy that would support institutions in improving the participation rates of underrepresented group. The United Kingdom has set up a national organization called the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) which seeks to understand and address access barriers to post-secondary education at the national level. According to OFFA's website, this independent public body has three core aims:

- to support and encourage improvements in the number and/or proportions of students in higher education from low income and other underrepresented groups
- to reduce as far as practicable the barriers to higher education for students from low income and other underrepresented groups by ensuring that institutions continue to invest in outreach and financial support
- to support and encourage equality of opportunity through the provision of clear and accessible financial information for students, their parents/carers and their advisers.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷Office for Fair Access. *Aims and Objectives*. (UK: OFFA, 2013) Available online: <http://www.offa.org.uk/about/objectives/>

Students believe that there are a wide variety of barriers beyond financial, and that universities would benefit from the assistance of an agency whose primary focus is on institutional policies and practices to improve participation and access for underrepresented students. While the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is charged with system-wide research and evaluation on issues of access, quality, and accountability,¹⁹⁸ an independent, centralized agency similar to the U.K.'s OFFA would be tasked with issues of access on the institutional level.

Recommendation Twenty-Three: Universities should be required to develop annual "Access Agreements" to set goals and plans to increase outreach and enrolment amongst groups who face barriers to participation or are traditionally underrepresented in PSE.

OFFA is typically charged with achieving its objectives through the development and approval of annual "Access Agreements" that each institution should submit to OFFA if the institution intends to charge more than an average amount for tuition fees¹⁹⁹. Each Access Agreement outlines the institution's strategies for widening participation at their respective schools, and is publicly available. This encourages research, transparency, and national dialogue on issues of access, as well as an incentive for institutions to continue to develop new ways to widen participation amongst students in the country.

In Ontario's case, each institution should develop an annual agreement, outlining its strategies to increase participation amongst underrepresented groups. Not only would this promote strategic direction to universities for the purposes of targeted outreach and enrolment amongst underrepresented groups, but would ensure that institutions are held accountable, at least to their own goals. These access agreements should require stakeholder consultation, and should be approved through university governing bodies and require consultation from students.

Recommendation Twenty-Four: Post-secondary education institutions should target their admission outreach towards communities that have a history of underrepresentation in post-secondary education.

Universities should develop a strategic plan to conduct outreach in communities with highly underrepresented populations. For example, McMaster's Engineering program specifically targets their outreach towards women, by offering scholarships to young girls interested in attending Engineering and Science Camp programs during the summer.²⁰⁰ Along the same lines, Ryerson hosted a summer camp focused on getting girls involved in engineering at a young age. A few years later, the same study found that 60 per cent of female students who attended the camp went on to pursue engineering in PSE.²⁰¹

By targeting their admissions outreach and developing programs which incentivize applications from underrepresented groups, students who may not have the necessary

¹⁹⁸ HEQCO *About Us* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario) Available online: <http://www.heqco.ca/EN-CA/ABOUT%20US/Pages/Home.aspx>

¹⁹⁹ Office For Fair Access. *Access Agreements*. (UK: OFFA, 2013) Available Online: <http://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/>

²⁰⁰ McMaster University. *Women in Engineering*. (Hamilton: McMaster University, 2013) Available Online: http://www.eng.mcmaster.ca/engalumni/women_in_eng/

²⁰¹ Gilbride, A., Kennedy, D., Waalen, J. & Zywno, M. "A proactive strategy for attracting women into engineering". *Canadian Journal of COounseling*. 33 (1): 1999.

support systems or mentorship in place can receive pertinent information about accessing PSE. This kind of outreach can work to make access to PSE information a more equitable process and work to diversify PSE attendees.

Recommendation Twenty-Five: As part of the Ontario Universities' Application Centre, demographic information from applicants should be collected including self-identification of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, first generation status, family income, etc.

The Ontario Universities' Application Centre was formed with the intention to improve a variety of enrolment management and planning activities. Centralizing the applications process "improved the ability to control multiple acceptances of offers of admission, and helped to reduce the amount of duplication and costs in processing multiple applications for admission."²⁰² One of the missing pieces since OUAC was formed in 1971 has been the collection of demographic information about applicants so that the Ontario government and institutions can gain a broader perspective on the types of applicants that their institutions are attracting. Using this information, institutions can make decisions and plans for how to increase access amongst particular groups that are underrepresented within their institution, or within specific programs at their institution.

This practice would not be out of line with what other jurisdictions have done including the United Kingdom and Australia. In the UK, contextual data is collected including socioeconomic background, self-declaration of disability, special needs, or medical conditions, ethnic origin, occupational background and national identity.²⁰³ Similarly, Australia's Higher Education Support Act 2003 requires approved providers to submit data about their applications and offers to the Minister.²⁰⁴ The applications and offers data collection includes information about:

- "The offers made by universities and acceptances of those offers by students
- Baseline data on the number of direct applications made to providers each year
- Applications with preferences that includes offers and acceptances by state, field of education, applicants' prior educational participation and a range of demographic characteristics including socioeconomic status, regionality and Indigenous status."

This information should be made publicly available, and then utilized to help formulate government policy and provide reports. In Ontario, where there is limited demographic information collected on applicants and registered students and the representation of particular groups in the university system, and in particular programs. This information is critical to a comprehensive access strategy.

Recommendation Twenty-Six: Universities should integrate Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition into their application and admissions processes.

²⁰² Ontario Universities Application Centre. *Background of the Centre*. (Guelph: OUAC, 2013) Available online: <http://www.ouac.on.ca/about/about-background/>

²⁰³ Supporting Professionalism in Admissions. *Contextualised Admissions*. (UK: SPA, 2013) Available online: <http://www.spa.ac.uk/information/contextualdata/>

²⁰⁴ Department of Education, Australian Government. *University Applications and Offers Data*. (Australia: Australian Government, 2013) Available Online: <http://heimshelp.deewr.gov.au/sites/heimshelp/resources/pages/apps-offers-data-collection>

The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)²⁰⁵ is a process designed to recognize knowledge and skills gained through professional and experiential learning, and provide academic credit commensurate with experience. Recognizing the value of PLAR assessment, the MTCU mandated that colleges utilize PLAR.

Ontario universities should adopt and utilize PLAR in order to assess the out-of-classroom experiences of prospective students such as co-op, work and volunteer experiences. This assessment should be allowed to count towards admissions requirements in order to account for students who have complimented their secondary school education with non-traditional learning opportunities.

7. Funding Support

There are many specific programs and policies that the government, primary and secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, and community agencies and stakeholders should engage in with the goals of increasing access among underrepresented groups. However, a comprehensive access strategy would fall significantly short in meeting its goals without effective funding mechanisms from the government to achieve these ends. Other jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and Australia have successfully implemented funding systems to ensure that community and institutional programs can be effectively funded.

Recommendation Twenty-Seven: The government should dedicate funding aimed at institution-specific and system-wide initiatives that aim to improve participation rates of underrepresented groups.

The government should consider dedicating funding aimed at supporting institution-specific initiatives, but also directed at system-wide initiatives that would ideally be encouraged through the finalization of a comprehensive access strategy. Some of the initiatives that this funding could support include:

- Developing a community of practice around issues of access, which would engage educational stakeholders throughout the province and encourage the sharing of best practices
- Programs such as the “Independent Learning Centre” which offers online assistance to Ontario students completing independent studies, as well as any Ontario students who require assistance with homework, advice on selecting courses, etc.
- Initiatives to support underrepresented groups such as the Gathering Place at Fanshawe College²⁰⁶ or the University Experience Program at Queen’s University.²⁰⁷

Australia created the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) aims to ensure that domestic students from low socioeconomic backgrounds

²⁰⁵ For further information on PLARs and OUSA’s recommendations regarding their implementation, please see: Minniti, Sam. *Mature Students*. (Toronto: OUSA, 2012)

²⁰⁶ Fanshawe College. *First Nations Centre*. (London, ON: Fanshawe College, 2013) Accessed: <http://www.fanshawec.ca/fnc>

²⁰⁷ Queen’s University. *University Experience Program*. (Kingston: Queen’s University, 2013) Accessed: <http://www.queensu.ca/admission/uep.html>

who demonstrate the competency for university have the ability to do so.²⁰⁸ It consists of two parts, the “participation component” which provides financial incentives to universities to increase participation from low socioeconomic backgrounds and to support retention and success, and the “Partnerships component” which provides funding to assist universities to develop programs in conjunction with primary and secondary schools, vocational education and training providers, governments, community groups and other stakeholders to build capacity for increased participation in higher education among underrepresented groups. In 2013, \$192, 054, 530 (\$AUS) were allocated to the HEPPP program.

CONCLUSION

Ontario has been very committed to its access agenda for over a decade, and deserves to be commended for that commitment. The result, of course, has been significant growth in participation and attainment among all age groups – especially young Ontarians. The current challenge for the province is to critically examine which kinds of students have been participating. Addressing the needs of those groups who continue to be underrepresented despite increased general participation is going to be crucial to meeting the goals of the province in enrolment, as well as ensuring a better future for the province.

OUSA’s above recommendations are intended to shine a light on the barriers and strategies unique to underrepresented groups while still mapping out a comprehensive access strategy for the province to move forward with.

²⁰⁸ Australian Government, Department of Industry. *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program*. (Australia: Australian Government, 2013) Available Online: <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Pages/default.aspx>

A COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS STRATEGY POLICY STATEMENT

WHEREAS All willing and qualified students in Ontario should be able to access and excel within Ontario's system of post-secondary education.

WHEREAS A comprehensive strategy should be devised that addresses all barriers and ensures access to post-secondary education for all willing and qualified students.

WHEREAS Costs should not act as a barrier, whether perceived or actual, for willing and qualified students to their desired post-secondary pathway.

WHEREAS An access strategy should start during primary education, continue through the completion of post-secondary education, and address multiple barriers preventing equal participation, including, but not limited to, financial, informational, motivational and academic factors.

WHEREAS An access strategy should support students in choosing the post-secondary pathway that best suits their competency, skills, and interests.

WHEREAS The provincial government should play the leading role in creating and funding an access strategy and subsequent programs.

WHEREAS The creation of an access strategy and subsequent programs should be founded on comprehensive data about trends in admissions and enrolment in post-secondary education for underrepresented groups.

WHEREAS To be successful, early outreach programs should be long-term, supported by multiple provincial ministries, and coordinated strategically within the municipalities and local communities, with the inclusion of existing programs.

WHEREAS There is currently very little focus within the post-secondary education sector of Ontario to create a unified access strategy that addresses the barriers that underrepresented groups experience.

WHEREAS There are many underrepresented groups who experience multiple barriers (including, but not limited to, financial, motivational and informational, and academic barriers) to accessing post-secondary education.

WHEREAS For many underrepresented groups in Ontario there is a lack of data on post-secondary participation and attainment, preventing systems and resources to be put in place.

WHEREAS Despite having access to funds to participate in PSE, many students continue to feel that the "benefits" of participating in PSE are not worth the upfront costs – in terms of initial financial obligations, time spent not working, and future levels of debt.

WHEREAS Despite the demonstrated benefits of many university transition programs, the cost of these programs may act as a deterrent for students who may have been out of school for several years.

WHEREAS There is insufficient information available to students, families and communities about education pathways, the costs and benefits of higher education, and available student financial aid.

WHEREAS Some underrepresented students may not have the necessary and/or mentorship to encourage them to participate and excel in PSE.

WHEREAS The stigma associated with seeking advice from a guidance counsellor in secondary school, which can lead many students needing assistance to not seek advice about post-secondary education.

WHEREAS Guidance counsellors may be spending the majority of their time helping students with personal issues, impacting their ability to provide careers and post-secondary pathways advice.

WHEREAS Students from underrepresented groups are often at risk of lower levels of academic achievement in primary and secondary school.

WHEREAS Students from some underrepresented groups often tend to be in applied streams in Ontario secondary schools.

WHEREAS The Ontario secondary school curriculum introduces academic streaming prior to students making educated choices about course selection, impacting their potential post-secondary pathways.

WHEREAS Transferring between applied and academic streams is very difficult due to the limited availability of transfer credits, the undesirable times these courses are offered, and the cap on the number of secondary school credits a student may receive.

WHEREAS The options available for students with insufficient credits or inadequate averages to transfer into PSE are limited and information on these programs tends to be inaccessible and decentralized.

WHEREAS Students may have experience that is unrecognized in the university applications and admissions process.

BIRT The provincial government should implement a comprehensive access strategy to foster increased participation of underrepresented groups in all types of post-secondary education.

BIFRT Early outreach programs should be tailored to the unique needs of a community and coordinated to ensure that community plans effectively support the programs.

BIFRT Early outreach programs need to combine social and academic supports through a blend of mentoring, tutoring, and other engagement activities to ensure academic success of students in early outreach programs.

BIFRT The government should look to the successful Pathways to Education Canada model when exploring community driven outreach programs and expanding access to the program within Ontario.

BIFRT Institutions should focus on developing partnerships with local organizations that already have relationships with young people from underrepresented communities (such as employment centres, youth groups, Aboriginal elders, etc.) for the purposes of information-sharing on post-secondary pathways.

BIFRT Each secondary school should have at least one certified Career Development Practitioner on-staff within their guidance counselling team.

BIFRT The process of guidance counselling should seek to be less stigmatizing by ensuring all students set-up meetings with counsellors throughout high school, in order to ensure that they are personally prepared for their transition into post-secondary education, including advice about course streaming and selection in Grade 9.

BIFRT Guidance counsellors should receive regular skills updating in regards to processes such as OSAP and financial aid, the process of applying to PSE, and the secondary courses and grades required for university.

BIFRT The Ministry of Education should phase out secondary school streaming.

BIFRT Students should be advised more carefully about the implications of entering into different academic streams, beginning well in advance of selecting streamed courses, and transfer between applied and academic courses should be facilitated by access to transfer credits that can be taken during regular school hours.

BIFRT Primary and secondary schools should provide information and resources to students, families, and communities to assist in making better-informed decisions about educational pathways. These resources include, but are not limited to, improved guidance counselling, parental involvement activities, and curriculum changes.

BIFRT Dual credit programs in high schools should be funded and expanded within Ontario colleges and should be introduced, monitored and evaluated at the university level.

BIFRT The Ministry of Education should continue to develop enrichment programs such as co-op credits and high skills major programs that are designed to increase motivation and retention of students from underrepresented groups.

BIFRT Bridging programs should be encouraged, funded, and evaluated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to help students with insufficient credits or inadequate entrance averages to enter post-secondary education.

BIFRT Transition programs should be encouraged, funded, and evaluated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and a provincial database should be created that would allow students to easily find transition programs within their area and which meet their individual needs.

BIFRT As part of a comprehensive access strategy the government should continue to support online education programs.

BIFRT The government should continue to strengthen the student financial assistance system so all students can access post-secondary education.

BIFRT Sector stakeholders should seek to demystify some of the beliefs held about post-secondary education, such as the availability of financial aid, job outcomes, debt levels, etc.

BIFRT The secondary school system should continue to teach best practices about being financially prepared for the costs of post-secondary education; including lessons about budgeting, applying for financial assistance, scholarships, etc. for both students and their families/ guardians.

BIFRT The provincial government should set aside grant money that would specifically go towards providing financial assistance to students who would be required to take a transition program before entering a degree program.

BIFRT The government should establish a centralized agency to assist public institutions with achieving goals to increase participation in higher education for underrepresented groups.

BIFRT Universities should be required to develop annual “Access Agreements” to set goals and plans to increase outreach and enrolment amongst groups who face barriers to participation or are traditionally underrepresented in PSE.

BIFRT Post-secondary education institutions should target their admission outreach towards communities that have a history of underrepresentation in post-secondary education.

BIFRT As part of the Ontario Universities’ Application Centre, demographic information from applicants should be collected including self-identification of race/ ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, first generation status, family income, etc.

BIFRT Universities should integrate Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition into their application and admissions processes.

BIFRT The government should dedicate funding aimed at institution-specific and system-wide initiatives that aim to improve participation rates of underrepresented groups.