



Policy Paper

System Vision

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Introduction: Creating the Vision

A famous Russian proverb states that, “Education is light, lack of it darkness.” It is the goal of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance to ensure a bright future for Ontario’s undergraduate students and in so doing, ensure a bright future for Ontario.

The government’s Reaching Higher plan comprised the largest investment in post-secondary education in forty years and has had success in improving the accessibility and accountability of the system. But even with this increase, Ontario institutions are still lagging behind other provinces and countries that have recognized the intrinsic value of universities and colleges to their future success. Additional operating funding has been met with an unanticipated enrollment boom, resulting in per-capita provincial funding that is still below the national average.

Money alone cannot fix the system. A cultural shift must occur within institutions and the general public. Institutions must re-discover the purpose and joy of teaching and learning and must explore new methods and opportunities for enhancing their student’s education. The public must be engaged in the process and recognize the inherent value of higher education, beyond its ability to merely provide employment credentials.

Many of today’s students have a dim view of their own future. They are faced with the prospect of high debt loads and an increasingly competitive global job market. Many do not feel that their undergraduate degree will be sufficient to provide them a bright future.

Perhaps something is lacking in the university experience that previously existed. Perhaps it is a misunderstanding amongst students, parents and employers. Or perhaps there is a problem with the degrees themselves. Shiny brochures may draw in anxious parents and wide-eyed teens with the promise of world-class professors and their frontier-seeking research, intimate and interactive learning environments and state-of-the art facilities and libraries. But as student-faculty ratios increase, it becomes more rare for an undergraduate student to experience a meaningful learning opportunity with a world-class professor, or even engage in small-scale learning environments in their third or fourth years. Indeed, new emphasis on research and innovation has turned high quality teaching into an afterthought.

With recent investments in financial assistance, a greater number of Ontarians have access to higher education, but many still do not, often as a result of socio-cultural barriers that have yet to be addressed. Tuition fees have continued to increase in recent years, even as the quality of education has diminished. The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) still has serious flaws. Despite record increases in enrolment driven by burgeoning demand, many historically underrepresented groups in Ontario continue to fall behind their counterparts in access and educational attainment.

Unfortunately, our understanding of these problems and their effects are limited. Sources of information on higher education in the province are difficult to come by and a great deal of research must be done to inform future policy decisions.

But there is reason to be optimistic; higher education in Ontario is not beyond repair. Recent government investments have halted what seemed to be the approaching collapse of the post-secondary system and put Ontario back on the path to improvement. The province’s public universities have a tradition of excellence and provide the potential for an unparalleled educational experience. Our campus communities of teachers and learners are highly capable and committed to improving their institutions. Our province can create a system of universities that is truly world-class and accessible, producing graduates and achievements that will ensure Ontario has a bright future.

For over a decade, OUSA has fought for its vision of an accessible, affordable, accountable and high quality post-secondary education system in Ontario. This vision is what has driven, and will continue to drive, our efforts for years to come.

This paper is only the beginning of the discussion. We at OUSA have a comprehensive set of policy that delves deeper into these and other issues. What this paper is meant to do is to describe our vision for the role of universities and the shared responsibility for the system amongst students, universities and government. It will then go on to propose core principles and values, examine emerging challenges, and conclude by presenting broad solutions which start the conversation towards the bright future we all desire.

The Role of Universities

Higher education is the cornerstone of any successful society. Universities are centres for the development of individuals, ideas and entire societies. They are also facilitators for discovery and the transmission of knowledge. The following statements will describe these roles:

Universities are places for learning, discovery and development of the individual student.

Students who complete a university degree must walk away with much more than a piece of paper. While the strict transfer of knowledge is a vital part of education, it must not be allowed to overshadow opportunities for creativity, discovery, critical thought and personal growth. Graduates should enter the workforce with knowledge and skills, but also a desire to create, learn and innovate. This does not diminish the need for the mastery of content, but discovery should grow beyond its current position in many institutions to be their primary goal. Students must have the opportunity to move past the lecture hall, beyond regurgitation and beyond the A, B, Cs of multiple choice exams.

The philosopher of education, John Dewey, once said that for all forms of education, “Everything depends on the quality of the experience which is had.” Furthermore, he believed that the quality of the experience was dependent on its influence upon future experiences. From this premise, Dewey was able to criticize the foundations of so-called “traditional education”, in favour of a more progressive form that was dependent upon both experience and formative education as opposed to the mere mastery or acquisition of content.

This theory underpins the importance of experiences in higher education that contain opportunities for discovery and development. Such experiences will have a positive impact on future experiences, to the benefit of the learner and their environment. Conceptually, this may be more important today, when information and environment changes on a daily basis. Those individuals with transferable skills who are able to create, discover and analyze will be the leaders and innovators of the twenty-first century. Therefore, we cannot operate a system of higher education whose only purpose is the transmission of content and the acquisition of certificates. The quality of higher education in Ontario should be driven by the opportunity for learning, discovery and development.

The concepts of co-discovery and frontier exploration of ideas should drive the development of both students and institutions in Ontario. Students will benefit from the application of concepts learned outside the classroom, and it can be argued that there is no greater joy than that obtained by discovery. The opportunity to discover will also build on future experiences, academic or otherwise. Moreover, institutions that pursue this principle will produce corollary benefits for society as a whole. Both the discoverers and discoveries are products of the system, and can be retained for the benefit of all.

Universities are a catalyst for socio-economic advancement for both the individual and entire jurisdiction.

Higher education is a key determinant of the future economic and social success of any region or country. For centuries, education has been recognized as integral to individual advancement. In one of his reports to the

Massachusetts Board of Education, the influential Horace Mann wrote that, “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” Although this statement was made in 1848, it certainly applies to higher education today. It has been statistically demonstrated that the more an individual learns, the more they are able to earn. Graduates are also healthier, less depressed, more likely to vote, to donate to charity, and to participate in their children’s education. This, of course, benefits not only the individual but also society as a whole. The overall investment in higher education also has high rates of return for the government of any province or country, and it has been demonstrated that underinvestment hinders productivity. Consequently, any individual or societal restraints on higher education will prevent advancement.

Moreover, the leaders of tomorrow will attend universities today, and the ideas that they and their teachers discuss will undoubtedly influence politics and policy in the present. Abraham Lincoln once wrote that, “The philosophy of the classroom today will be the philosophy of government tomorrow.” Edward Everett, a former President of Harvard University in the mid-nineteenth century, believed that education was a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army. Thus, it can be argued that the political vitality of any province, state or country is intimately tied with the efficacy of its system of higher education.

One cannot ignore the value that higher education can provide for moral and civic development, especially in the context of a province and a nation where youth are becoming less engaged in public life.

Universities are facilitators for research and technological development

As institutions based on discovery and learning, research is a key component of any university’s mandate. Arguably, universities are recognized as the supreme public institution for research. They receive hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants to explore important questions and develop solutions to intractable questions that are often in the public interest. Another beneficial by-product of this research, either intentional or unintentional, can be technological development.

As Ontario universities have expanded their research capacities, the need for additional funding has resulted in greater investment from the private sector. While these funds have resulted in many new breakthroughs, it is important that all research is carried out for the public good and at no time should corporate interests affect research at our public institutions.

Core System Principles

Given the challenges facing Ontario and the role that universities play, it is important that a set of core system principles is in place to drive future development.

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The bedrock of our higher education system must be its status as a shared responsibility among many partners, each of them reaping tangible benefits and providing significant resources to ensure the system’s success.

Primary responsibility for higher education rests with government, and this responsibility extends far beyond financing. As a public endeavour that should be accessible to all those who are qualified, the government has a responsibility to foster access and provide assistance to those in need who wish to attend. Moreover, the government has a responsibility to ensure that the cost of education is affordable through the use of regulatory measures. The government is also responsible to the general public for the accountability of the system as an agent of their tax dollars.

The general public, which shares greatly in the benefits of post-secondary education, must support this system through taxation. Furthermore, as the prime benefactor of a healthy system that creates jobs, generates tax revenue and drives socio-economic growth, society must bear the lion's share of funding.

As noted by Nicholas Barr, architect of the new university system in England, "higher education creates benefits beyond those to the individual – benefits in terms of growth, the transmission of values and the development of knowledge for its own sake... thus, taxpayer subsidies should remain a permanent part of the landscape."¹ According to the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, the 22% of the population with a university degree contribute 41% of income tax paid and only receive 14% of government transfers.² Moreover, a TD Economics topic paper published in 2004 notes that graduates have better health, longer life, better communication skills, greater self-confidence, and are less likely to participate in crime.³ They are also more tolerant of people from other ethnic backgrounds and more likely to vote in elections.⁴ In other words, investment in higher education is an investment in a healthy, dynamic and politically engaged citizenry. Higher education benefits all of society and, therefore, society is obligated to support it.

Students receive tangible individual benefits from higher education and should also share some responsibility for the system through the provision of tuition fees. However, there are reasonable limits to the percentage contribution that is made, as graduates are not the sole beneficiaries of their education. As benefactors of a healthy public system, students also have the responsibility to use their education to become active contributors to the economic, social and cultural fabric of the community that has contributed to their success.

Generally, it is the responsibility of universities to be system stewards. They must be accountable to those who provide them with the financial resources for their operations – the general public, students and government. They are also responsible at a local level for ensuring accessibility and quality through the provision of institutional financial assistance and the assurance of a high quality experience. Ensuring an equitable balance between teaching and research is also an important responsibility.

This compact of responsibility does not end with the government, students and universities. Others have responsibility over the system, as benefactors of and investors in higher education, including faculty and staff, parents and employers.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AS A CONTINUUM

Higher education is too often conceived of as an add on to the public education system, meant only for a privileged minority. Instead, education from kindergarten to post-graduate studies must be considered a continuum with a diversity of pathways to meet the needs of every Ontarian. Post-secondary education must become the expected next step for all high school graduates.

A RIGHT, NOT A COMMODITY

Unfortunately, students and employers are increasingly demanding certification rather than education from their post-secondary experience. This commodification has the potential to transform higher education in our province into a good to be purchased only for individual monetary benefit. Treating a degree or diploma as a commodity could severely damage our system. Such a mindset often leads to greater deregulation and privatization, which OUSA firmly opposes. Education, from kindergarten through post-secondary, must be considered a right for all students.

¹ Nicholas Barr, "Financing Education: Lessons from the UK Debate and Elsewhere," *The Political Quarterly* 70, no.3 (2003): 372.

² Berger, Motte, Parkin Ed: *The Price of Knowledge*. (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009).

³ TD Economics, *Investing in Higher Education Delivers a Stellar Rate of Return*, 22 January 2004 (Toronto: TD Economics, 2004), 2.

⁴ Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Benefits for Higher Education Reach Far Beyond the Job Market*, (England: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2003).

The pursuit of knowledge must be considered worthwhile for its own sake and students should be encouraged to follow their interests and broaden their horizons simply because it enriches one life and society.

A COMMITMENT TO AFFORDABILITY & PREDICTABILITY

In order to ensure access, the cost of education must be affordable for those who wish to attend. Tuition and ancillary fees must not place an unacceptable burden on students and families.

Alongside affordability, predictability in cost and funding is of the utmost importance. Any successful and sustainable system of higher education requires a holistic long-term commitment to ensure its success.

Universities must be able to plan for the future and students must know their tuition is safe from sudden deregulation and rapid increase.

UNIVERSAL & EQUITABLE ACCESS

Whether for reasons of greater social equality, a more engaged citizenry, or simply to allow individuals to pursue their dreams, all willing and qualified students must be able to access PSE. But access is about more than just getting into the system. Students, once accepted into university, must not be deterred or diverted from completing their degree due to financial, physical, cultural or social barriers.

Individuals from certain groups face greater barriers to accessibility. These include low-income Ontarians, Aboriginal Ontarians, rural and northern Ontarians, first-generation students, students with dependents and middle-income students. For many of Ontario's youth, knowledge barriers play just as great a role as monetary barriers. OUSA supports a province-wide early intervention strategy to tackle this problem. We must not rest until equitable access is achieved for all.

While some complain that educating too many students devalues their degrees, OUSA rejects this notion. Many times throughout history we have underestimated the value of further education and our students' ability to perform. Indeed, research from the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has shown that the value of post-secondary credential is increasing at a faster pace than the share of the population with such a credential.

FAIR AND PROGRESSIVE COST-RECOVERY

If one of the goals of the system is to provide equitable access to post-secondary education to all Ontarians, any model for recovering the cost of that system must not simply incorporate a plethora of uncoordinated elements. Instead, it must be designed with fairness and equity as its foundation. Yes, students should contribute, but through a fair cost-sharing model.

EQUAL EMPHASIS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Universities are, first and foremost, places of learning. This learning includes both the cutting-edge research that broadens our collective knowledge, as well as the transfer of this collective knowledge from instructor to pupil. It should be the goal of every university to ensure that both of these pursuits are given equal consideration.

There is much evidence, however, that this equality is paid only lip-service by many of our institutions. As the Boyer Commission points out, "every research university can point with pride to the skilled teachers within its ranks, but it is in research grants, books, articles, papers and citations that every university defines its true worth."⁵

CLARITY OF TARGETS & OBJECTIVES

⁵ The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities" (New York: Boyer Commission, 1998); accessed online at <http://naples.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf/webform/overview>

Universities, government and even students have a broad understanding of their aims. However, specific targets and objectives are rarely defined, and progress is almost never tracked. In order to move forward effectively, universities and government must set clear targets and objectives that are reasonably attainable.

STUDENT-CENTRIC

A student-centric system should emphasize the quality of the educational experience that a student receives. This will ensure that universities continually focus on the opportunities for learning, discovery and development throughout one's university career – a key indicator of quality and of student success.

DIVERSE AND INTERNATIONAL

Exposure to a diversity of cultures is crucial to a well-rounded educational experience. Diversity comes in many forms, however, and one that is often overlooked is the need for academic diversity through a wide range of curricula available to all students. Both of these must be provided to ensure a high-quality education.

Research clearly shows that the level of diversity on campus can have a positive impact on the quality of educational experience that a student receives. This diversity must begin with the internationalization of our institutions, both academically and through an increase in the number of international students. Over the last several decades, universities across Ontario have become increasingly international. They have accepted that the global arena can provide new ideas and new perspectives to enrich the quality of scholarship in Ontario, and that the presence of international students creates an enriched learning experience for all.

But new ideas and perspectives can also be found here in Ontario. By destroying the barriers to accessibility that exist for Ontarians from certain cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds we would not only provide access for students from traditionally underrepresented cultures, we would create more multicultural institutions where students learn about each other and the world, thus preparing them for the global society they will inherit.

RESPONSIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE

Charles Darwin once said that, "It's not the biggest, the brightest, or the best that will survive, but those who adapt the quickest." In a competitive world undergoing constant change, a system of higher education must be highly responsive. If it is not, the system itself, and the society that relies on its success, risks falling behind those who are able to quickly adapt.

That said, policy changes to higher education in Ontario are too often reactionary and are made based on politics or their ability to be successful in a fiscally restrained framework. In order to truly meet the demands of an accessible, affordable and high-quality system, systemic changes and their long-term impacts must be carefully considered. Evidence that a change will bring improvement must be present.

TRANSPARENT & ACCOUNTABLE

As public institutions receiving public funds, as well as revenue from students, universities must be transparent and accountable in all of their activities – financial, academic and otherwise. The provincial government has a responsibility to ensure that taxpayers and students receive this information.

STUDENT REPRESENTATION ON UNIVERSITY GOVERNING BODIES

One thing that remains constant across university governing boards is the low percentage of student members – fewer than 10 per cent at most Ontario universities. Given that they are an integral component of the university community, and contribute over 45 per cent of the operating costs through tuition fees, representation must be improved.

STUDENT CONTROL OF ANCILLARY FEES

Until 1994, the implementation of new ancillary fees was under the control of each university, through its Board of Governors, Governing Council, or other equivalent governing body. Following decreases in government funding in the late 1980s and early 1990s, institutions increasingly turned to ancillary fees to cover budget deficits. This practice led to a marked increase in such fees.

Students lobbied successfully for new regulations governing ancillary fees and, as a result, student unions gained significant influence and control over existing fees, as well as control over the implementation of new fees. The principles that brought these changes into effect are still factors today. University administration should not have free reign to increase ancillary fees to side-step tuition regulations imposed by government. The control of ancillary fees must continue to lie with students as they stand to bear both the costs and the benefits.

AN EMPHASIS ON STUDENT SUCCESS

In the context of the post-secondary system, discussions of quality have traditionally been somewhat limited in scope. Somewhere between measuring student-to-faculty ratios, deferred maintenance and post-graduation employment rates, the question of what a successful post-secondary experience looks like has been drowned out. 'High quality' has become interchangeable with 'success', confusing the goal for students with the measurements of such.

First and foremost, the discussion on quality must shift toward a more student centric understanding of a high quality education. The question must change from "what do we need to fund for a quality education" into "what does it take for students to succeed." Students are answering the latter question by moving past many of the traditional indicators and focusing on emerging areas of teaching quality, the broader learning environment, and student support programs.

Critical Challenges

ADEQUATELY FUNDING THE SYSTEM

The economic downturn has left governments with little room for new spending. Ontario's universities need money but governments have little to offer them, even though the returns on investment are considerable. Students already pay a much greater proportional cost than their peers in other North American jurisdictions and they have seen class sizes increase along with tuition. The solution must be a combination of decreasing ballooning university costs and increasing government funding.

BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Many years of government emphasis on research and innovation have resulted in universities that prize research funding well above quality instruction. Students are taught by professors who often lack any formal training in teaching and who know full well that their research – not their teaching – is the key to tenure and promotion. Universities inevitably follow the money and without incentives to improve teaching and learning, nothing will change.

CHANGING ENROLLMENT

Over the next twenty years, over 65,000 new students in the Greater Toronto Area will wish to access post-secondary education. Meanwhile, enrolment at schools in less urban areas of Ontario will begin to see declining enrolment and will begin to face difficulty filling seats. It is important the government has a transparent plan to deal with burgeoning enrolment in some areas and declining enrolment in others. This challenge will reshape the face of PSE in Ontario for years to come.

DIFFERENTIATION AND CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE

A debate has begun across Canada on the topic of differentiation – a word that means different things to different people. Some see it as the natural evolution of centres of excellence across the Province. Others see it as the

creation of teaching-focused universities to free-up money for a select few research-intensive institutions. Eventually, the government must also engage in this debate and decide if changes to the current system are warranted.

STUDENT MOBILITY

Improving students' ability to move between institutions and retain credit for prior learning will allow them to find their own path to realizing their full potential. A fair, accountable and comprehensive credit transfer system, from college to university, university to university and college to college, must continue to be one of the government's long-term goals.

Broad Solutions

ENSURING STUDENT SUCCESS

Indicators like smaller class sizes or better university infrastructure can no longer be regarded as the end goals of quality improvement; they are pieces of the puzzle that further our true goal: ensuring student success. A serious quality-improvement strategy must adopt the student success lens and further the goal of increasing the number or well-educated graduates. This will be especially important when improving student mobility and discussing institutional differentiation.

EMPHASIZE QUALITY TEACHING

Stressing research without providing equal support teaching is what has caused the current imbalance between them. The solution is for government to demonstrate their unequivocal commitment to quality instruction. This should begin with increased funding for teaching support services, incentives for institutions to implement new teaching methods, incentives for institutions to develop training in teaching for PhD students, and a provincial grant system that supports research and innovation into teaching improvements in higher education.

CREATE INCENTIVES TO FILL CAPACITY WHERE IT EXISTS

While overcapacity is becoming a serious issue in the Greater Toronto Area, other institutions across the Province are expected to see declining enrolment and a greater need for students to fill seats. Before endorsing the construction of a new university or satellite campuses near Toronto, the government should exhaust all options which assist students in finding pathways to institutions where there is space. The many millions of dollars needed for new Toronto campuses would be much better spent in the form of grants for students who choose to go to school away from home and outside the GTA.

DEVISE AND IMPLEMENT AN EARLY OUTREACH STRATEGY

The best way to fight declining enrolment, while also increasing participation in universities, is to create an early intervention strategy and reach out to students from underrepresented groups. The government has invested in such programs before, most notably by funding an expansion of the Pathways to Education Program, but an issue of this importance needs serious government attention and a coherent strategy for success. Patchwork funding programs are no longer enough.

CONSIDER CAREFULLY THE IMPLICATIONS OF MORE SATELLITE CAMPUSES

Building satellite campuses in communities around Toronto would undoubtedly have significant positive effects on the local community both economically and socially. While it may be necessary to allow such expansion in the Greater Toronto Area, the government must ensure institutions avoid the pitfalls that can occur in the management of distant campuses. It is important that satellites are well-positioned geographically and have adequate land available for long-term sustainability. Governance structures must be examined to prevent satellites from becoming second-tier pieces of a larger institution. Finally, adequate student support services must be available before students enrol at the satellite.

RESIST INVASIVE DIFFERENTIATION AND INCLUDE STUDENT SUCCESS IN THE DEBATE

Differentiation has a multitude of meanings. Thus, before discussing it we must properly define what we are talking about. OUSA fully rejects the notion that Ontario should take research away from smaller schools to create a two-tiered system of liberal arts institutions and a few large, research-intensive universities. This would hamper, not improve a system that relies on competition to ensure the best projects are funded. It would also have negative impacts on communities across Ontario where universities are the main source of innovation for local industries.

OUSA supports an organic and responsive system, free of central planning, that is based on incentives rather than rules. Through the accountability framework, universities should identify areas of strength and continue to build on them, with the help of the government. Innovation must be supported through the mandate of the institution and the needs of the community in which it is located. Differentiation of this kind will result in increased efficiency and numerous centres of excellence where the climate for innovation can be nurtured in different ways.

Through all future discussions on differentiation, the needs of students must be considered. Currently, concerns over research competition and the need for innovation have gained a stranglehold on the debate. Any movement in this area will have a profound affect on students and that must become a major piece of this discussion.

IDENTIFY COST SAVINGS

With university budgets strained the breaking point, it is tempting to think that greater government funding and higher tuition fees are the only solution. But a third option has yet to be adequately explored – finding savings in the current model. Government and institutions must fully explore all saving opportunities, from using economies of scale, to changing the way research and teaching are delivered.

PROVIDE INSTITUTIONS WITH PREDICTIBLE LEVELS OF FUNDING

Too often, universities receive a bundle of extra government funding on or near the last day of the fiscal year. As a result, institutions must guess in their budgets how much last-minute funding will come in, usually with no idea of the true amount or whether it will be earmarked for a certain area. This can be very disruptive to long- and even short-term planning efforts. To maintain a healthy system, the government must enhance transparency and predictability in the funding formula.

IMPROVE TRACKING OF STUDENTS THROUGH THE SYSTEM

Before we can face the challenge of increasing enrolment and perfect a system-wide credit transfer system, we must first learn more about the multitude of pathways students take throughout their post-secondary careers. The Ontario Education Number (OEN) currently serves this purpose at the primary and secondary level and, though there is wide-spread support for expanding the OEN to post-secondary education, the government has yet to follow-through on this initiative.

Conclusion

Higher education is a key determinant of Ontario's future economic and social success. It has been statistically demonstrated that the more an individual learns, the more they are able to earn. Graduates are also healthier, less depressed, more likely to vote and more likely to participate in their children's education. This, of course, not only has benefits for the individual but society as a whole. The overall investment in higher education also has high rates of return for the government of any province or country, and it has been demonstrated that underinvestment hinders productivity. Irish poet and dramatist W.B. Yeats once wrote that education was the lighting of a fire. A bright future for Ontario depends on higher education.

We urge the government to adopt our principles and accept our recommendations. Together, we can make higher education in Ontario the best the world, but it will require an honest commitment to improvement from all partners.