

It is estimated that over 70 per cent of future jobs in Canada will require some form of post-secondary education (PSE).ⁱ Equitable access to higher education is critical to developing a workforce that meets the needs of the Canadian economy, reducing poverty, and creating a more just society. Unfortunately many individuals in Ontario face significant barriers in pursuing education beyond secondary school. In particular, six major groups are under-represented in Ontario's PSE system: low-income students, Aboriginal students, first generation students, rural and northern students, students with dependants, and students with disabilities. Potential students from these groups face financial, informational, motivational, academic, physical and other barriers to pursuing and persisting through post-secondary studies. Some of these barriers are described below.

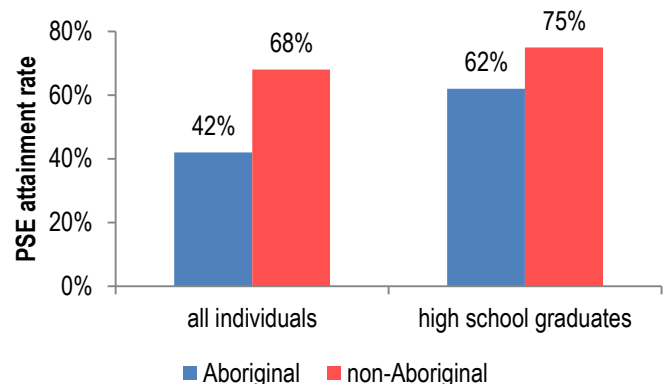
Low-income Students: Forty-nine per cent of youth aged 18-24 from families in the top income quartile have attended university, compared to only 18 per cent among their counterparts from the lowest income quartile.ⁱⁱ Moreover, youth from second and third income quartile are only slightly more likely to attend university than those from the bottom income quartile, indicating that household income has a bearing on PSE participation for three-quarters of Ontario families.ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps most concerning is that the participation gap between low and high-income families has been growing since 2003.^{iv} Low-income students typically do not have sufficient funds to cover the up-front costs of PSE, may overestimate the costs of attending an institution, and may be averse to accruing large amounts of debt to finance university studies. Low-income students also face non-financial barriers: they may lack information about bursary and scholarship programs, have lower parental expectations of attending university, often attend poorer quality schools and need to work a larger number of hours in paid employment during secondary school. All of these factors have been shown to impact the academic performance and motivation needed to attend a post-secondary institution.

Aboriginal Students: Aboriginal^v individuals are significantly less likely to have a university certificate or degree: only 9 per cent of the Ontario Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 has a university credential compared with 26 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population.^{vi} As the university attainment rate of non-Aboriginal Ontarians has risen, the gap in PSE participation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals has widened from 12 to 19 per cent.^{vii} Once Aboriginal students enter PSE, they are more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal students to abandon their studies without completing a credential.^{viii} The lower participation rate of Aboriginal students in PSE has been attributed to a number of factors. Low completion of secondary school plays a large role (see Figure 1). Aboriginal youth are more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal students to drop out of

secondary school, with dropout rates of over 50 per cent on many reserves.^{ix} In addition, many Aboriginal families are low-income and come from rural and northern communities where there are additional financial obstacles to attending university.^x Aboriginal students are often mature students, and frequently cite family responsibilities as a major barrier to completing their studies. Finally, the legacy of the residential school system and the western-oriented culture of many campuses have led to a culture of mistrust between Aboriginal students and institutions of higher education.^{xi}

First Generation Students: Students with parents who have not attended post-secondary education are much less likely to participate in PSE themselves; among Canadian students whose parents have less than a secondary school diploma, 29 per cent enrol in PSE, a level that more than doubles to 72 per cent for those whose parents hold an undergraduate degree.^{xii} First generation students often face informational barriers stemming from lack of familial guidance and information about PSE. They face financial barriers, as they are less likely to have family members who saved for their education. Additionally, they face academic barriers and have been found to have slightly lower grades than their peers. All of these factors have a bearing on first generation students' ability to successfully pursue post-secondary studies.

Figure 1: Influence of secondary school completion on Aboriginal participation in PSE



Rural and Northern Students: Students who live further than 80 kilometres from the nearest university are 22 per cent less likely to enrol in university studies than those that live within 40 km of an institution. Rural and northern students typically must attend college or university away from the parental home, which removes them from familiar social support networks and adds over \$7,000 to the annual cost of attending a post-secondary institution. Students from rural and northern areas are also more likely to be from low-income and first generation families, and are more likely to drop-out of post-secondary studies before completing their credential than their non-rural counterparts.

Students with Dependants: Individuals who report having a child by age 26 are less than half as likely to have attended university as those with no children.^{xiii} Students with dependants 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. When an individual with dependants is prevented from accessing higher education, both the individual and child are denied access to the economic and social benefits associated with completing a post-secondary credential.

Students with Disabilities: One in seven Canadians has a disability, and while high school completion for this population is only slightly below the provincial average, PSE attainment for students with disabilities is 60% lower than the Ontario provincial average.^{xiv} Students with disabilities face a broad and multi-faceted range of social, medical, administrative, and financial barriers that may affect their ability to access and succeed in the current PSE system. Additionally, the physical limitations of some campuses and learning facilities pose significant challenges for individuals with physical disabilities.

Government Strategy

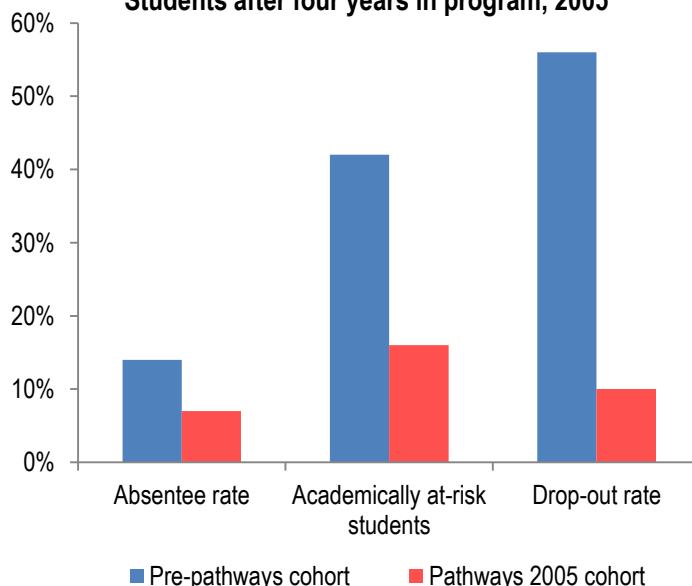
As part of its *Reaching Higher Plan*, the Ontario government initiated the Access to Opportunities Strategy (AOS) in 2007. The objective of this strategy was to improve the post-secondary enrolment, retention, and success of Aboriginal students, francophone students, first generation students, Crown Wards and students with disabilities. Between 2007-08 and 2009-10, \$106 million dollars were allocated through the AOS. However, recent studies indicate that the participation gaps for several groups, including low-income and Aboriginal students are still rising.

Moving Forward

Students believe that addressing barriers that underrepresented groups face to participation in post-secondary studies requires an integrated, holistic approach to access. When considering access to post-secondary education, barriers and groups often overlap. For instance, an Aboriginal student is more likely to be low-income and also from a rural or northern community. Evidence strongly suggests that a holistic access strategy, which simultaneously addresses financial, informational and motivational barriers to higher education, will be the most successful in increasing university participation rates among underrepresented groups. Students have identified the following as necessary elements of a holistic access strategy for post-secondary education.

Early Outreach Programs: Early outreach is vital given that half of youth decide to attend PSE before grade 9.^{xv} Many of the most successful early outreach initiatives, like Pathways to Education, consist of long-term mentorship relationships and combine multiple supports including financial incentives for participation, tutoring, and parental involvement. Since the Pathways to Education program was implemented in the Regent Park neighbourhood of Toronto, it has decreased dropout rates from 56 to 10 per cent, and increased PSE participation fourfold (see Figure 2)^{xvi}.

Figure 2: Results for Regent Park Pathways Students after four years in program, 2005



Primary and Secondary Outreach: Primary and secondary education reaches nearly every youth in Ontario and can provide students with information about post-secondary pathways, financial assistance, and career planning. Students believe that an increased emphasis on PSE in the guidance and careers curriculum can raise participation rates. This could include having every student visit a post-secondary campus, including a mock OSAP application and financial aid literacy information in the curriculum, and ensuring guidance counsellors have up-to-date information about PSE.

Pathway Mobility: Roughly 25 per cent of Ontario's college students are attending college to prepare for university, but only 9 per cent actually enrol in university.^{xvii} Without fully developed transfer mechanisms many qualified students cannot access their pathway of choice. Since many underrepresented groups access the college system at rates comparable to the general population but lag behind in accessing university, improved pathway mobility could facilitate university participation for these students.

Financial Assistance: Many students from underrepresented groups face financial barriers to post-secondary studies, especially considering tuition in Ontario is the highest in the country. The strong regulation of tuition is a necessary component to access, combined with increases in targeted non-repayable financial aid to students from underrepresented groups, to help combat debt aversion. Reforms to OSAP including raising the funding levels for students with dependants, and expanding access to part-time students are also important.

Online Access: Online learning has the potential to reduce financial, physical and geographic barriers to access. Rural and northern students, students with dependants, and mature students are often unable to leave their communities to access post-secondary institutions. Government initiatives to expand online learning into a vehicle for high quality education could enable those unable to physically get to a campus to participate in higher education.

Institutional Supports and Transformation: Institutional practice, culture and policy need to be responsive and open to the needs of underrepresented students. Students from rural and northern, Aboriginal and first generation backgrounds may feel torn between their culture and community and the university environment. In order to be successful, institutions must be equipped with support centres that will foster a community that empowers students to feel welcome and included in the fabric of an institution, regardless of their situation. In addition, strong student support services are necessary to ensure that every post-secondary student has the tools and resources necessary to succeed in his or her educational pathway.

ⁱ Bob Rae. 2005. *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

ⁱⁱ Berger, Joseph, Anne Motte, and Andrew Parkin. 2009. *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada*. 4th edition. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

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

^{iv} Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. 2010. *Third Annual Review and Research Plan*. Toronto.

^v Defined here as those that self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit.

^{vi} R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. 2010. *Promising practices: Increasing and supporting participation for Aboriginal students in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

^{vii} Finnie, Ross, Stephen Childs, and Andrew Wismer. 2010. *Aboriginals in post-secondary education*. L-SLIS Research Brief, Toronto: MESA Project.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Berger, Joseph, Anne Motte, and Andrew Parkin. 2009. *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada*. 4th edition. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. 2009. *Promising Practices: Increasing and supporting participation for Aboriginal Students in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

^{xii} Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. 2010. *Third Annual Review and Research Plan*. Toronto.

^{xiii} Shaienks, Danielle, Tomasz Gluszynski and Justin Bayard. 2009. *Postsecondary education participation and dropping out: Differences across university, college and other types of postsecondary institutions*. Ottawa: Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics.

^{xiv} David Holmes. 2005. *Embracing Differences: Post-Secondary Education among Aboriginal Students, Students with Children and Students with Disabilities*. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

^{xv} Finnie, Ross, Stephen Childs and Andrew Wismer. 2008. *When did you decide?* MESA Project Research Brief, Toronto: MESA Project.

^{xvi} Adapted from Boston Consulting Group. BCG assessment of pathways to education. Executive Summary, Toronto: BCG 2007.

^{xvii} Colleges Ontario. 2009. *Student Mobility between Ontario's Colleges and Universities*. Toronto.