OUSA
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Accessibility

RESULTS FROM THE
2020 ONTARIO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SURVEY

about OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of over 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight institutions across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) proudly acts as an advocacy group for more than 150,000 professional and undergraduate students across the province, centring and amplifying student voices on a variety of topics within the post-secondary sector. To best achieve this, OUSA conducts a biennial survey known as the Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey (OUSS, formerly the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey), which highlights student perspectives on issues and potential improvements to post-secondary, and results from these surveys subsequently inform our advocacy. This report is one of three that reviews the data collected from the current survey, looking specifically at post-secondary accessibility and assesses the primary areas of concern related to educational access.

This iteration of the OUSS was conducted in November 2020, surveying students from OUSA's eight member schools: Brock University, Laurentian University, McMaster University, Trent Durham University, Queen's University, the University of Waterloo, Western University, and Wilfrid Laurier University. At Western University and Brock University, the survey was run as a quality assurance study.

We gathered 5,697 complete responses, with surveys being considered complete if the respondent answered at least 30 percent of the questions asked. Most respondents were domestic students: 91 percent identified as Canadian citizens, and 2 percent identified as permanent residents. 7 percent of our sample indicated they were international students in Canada on a visa. Results were weighted by institution.

Low-income students continue to struggle when paying for their education. 62 percent of respondents who reported their individual income shared that they made less than $25,000 in 2020. University education is undeniably becoming more expensive and low-income

students continue to be put in a position of overworking themselves to pay their way through their degree.

Beyond financial access to post-secondary, many students are concerned about campus culture in relation to pre-established identities such as age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and race. The greatest percentage of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students said they felt "somewhat" comfortable on campus (47 percent), followed by "very" comfortable (40 percent). This trend was reversed for cishetero students who had the greatest percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" comfortable on campus (50 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (41 percent). Comparatively, 46 percent of racialized students indicated that they only felt somewhat comfortable on campus. The trend of marginalized groups not feeling safe on campus continues for other access groups like first-generation, mature, and international students, indicating a shift needed in campus culture in order to ensure students feel safe while attending post-secondary institutions in Ontario.

Physically navigating a campus and an institution can be challenging for students with disabilities. 27 percent of respondents identified as a person with a disability, and of these respondents, 45 percent stated they felt "somewhat" safe on their campus. Students with disabilities face unique challenges accessing academic accommodations, physically accessing buildings on campus, and dealing with discrimination from instructors and peers. Reimagining how institutions approach teaching, as well as how campuses are designed, can significantly benefit the increasing number of students living with a disability in post-secondary.

Throughout a student's post-secondary career, they may choose to transfer programs or schools to achieve financial, personal, educational and/or career goals. Our survey found that 15 percent of student respondents reported that they had transferred credits to their cur-

rent program or institution. The most common reasons for transferring to a different institution were related to their program: either to access a specific program not offered at their previous institution (48 percent) or to access a specific program that the student perceived to be better at a different institution (37 percent). Having a strong transfer and credit recognition system that supports the varied reasons that students choose or may be required to transfer is an important element of an equitable, accessible, and diverse post-secondary sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced students to reconsider their housing arrangements, and consequently, the rates of students living on- versus off-campus shifted compared to results from OUSA's previous surveys. 51 percent of respondents attribute their inability to secure housing due to COVID-19 restrictions, while 28 percent cite cost as their primary reason. 58 percent of students in our sample stated that they were familiar with their rights/responsibilities as a tenant under the Residential Tenancies Act, while 42 percent stated that they did not. The cost of quality student housing has been steadily increasing over the past decade, creating an additional accessibility barrier for students in their pursuit of post-secondary education.

Accessibility is a broad term that encompasses physical, academic and financial barriers students experience while navigating post-secondary. OUSA has, and will continue to, advocate for ensuring students from a variety of backgrounds have equitable access to their education, and we are hopeful that the results of this survey will serve as evidence to support this concern.

INTRODUCTION

Access to post-secondary education is an integral and driving principle behind OUSA's advocacy. It is widely known that several disparities and inadequate supports are leading to various population groups being underrepresented in Ontario's post-secondary system. Given that higher education serves as a mechanism for individuals to move up the economic ladder and attain sustainable livelihoods, equitable access to education is critical to facilitate not only entry into post-secondary, but retention and completion as well.

OUSA's biennial survey, the OUSS, is one of the few consistent data collection tools in the province that gathers comprehensive information and insight about students' post-secondary experiences. Previously known as the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey, the initiative began in 2009 as part of a national, multi-institutional effort to provide student-focused data for provincial and national leaders in hopes of informing various program and policy interventions to improve the post-secondary sector. Since then, OUSA has continued to run the survey to monitor trends and give voice to student concerns that help guide our policy recommendations and advocacy.

This report on accessibility is one in a series of three based on the results from this iteration of the OUSS. Initially, the survey was scheduled to be administered in 2019; however impending changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) resulted in the decision to delay the survey by a year in order to capture the effects of these changes on students. Unpredictably, the COVID-19 pandemic also hit in 2020 which added another layer of turmoil for post-secondary students. Thus, our survey was distributed at a time when students were grappling with the consequences of both events and the questions were modified to reflect this.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a means to both increase and decrease access to post-secondary edu-

cation. For students who had difficulty getting accommodations during in-person learning, the pandemic paved the way for more accessibility requests to be met thereby granting students with the necessary support to fully participate in their education. Conversely, the pandemic also decreased access for students whose remote learning environments were not conducive to engaging in their courses. This includes issues such as limited internet connectivity, a lack of technological tools, caregiving responsibilities, and distracting and/or unsafe physical spaces.

Notably, access to education has been a consistent challenge for many marginalized student groups. Stemming from larger systemic forces including but not limited to racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and ageism, various student groups are underrepresented in post-secondary in Ontario. Unstable access to a safe and dignified education has severe consequences for these groups and perpetuates cycles of mental health struggles as well as economic immobility. When access to education is discussed, the conversation often revolves around barriers to entry and enrolment. However, proximity to classes, the ability to physically enter buildings, the availability of support and academic services, and use of campus facilities should also be considered as they can significantly affect students' access to education. There are also several factors that influence accessibility to these areas like physical and emotional safety, comfort levels, finances, and policy frameworks. The demand and interest for post-secondary education remains strong. Between 2021-22 alone, Ontario universities saw an 8.4 percent increase in applications.[1] As enrolment numbers continue to rise and the height of the pandemic begins to subside, it is critical to identify which specific student groups are not only applying to university but are enrolling and graduating as well. Consequently, this will flag the inequities and barriers that prevent marginalized students from prospering in

post-secondary education. We are hopeful that the results and analysis presented in this report will act as a catalyst for students, stakeholders, institutions, and the provincial government to come together to incite the necessary change needed to equitably improve post-secondary education for all.

METHODOLOGY

The OUSS was conducted in November 2020, surveying students from OUSA's eight member schools (Brock University, Laurentian University, McMaster University, Queen's University, Trent University Durham GTA, the University of Waterloo, Western University, and Wilfrid Laurier University). This was the fifth iteration of this survey, formerly the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey run in 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017.[2]

While the OUSS is typically a biennial survey, the expected 2019 iteration was postponed until 2020 to capture significant changes to OSAP that were made in 2019. The delay also allowed for the questions and analysis to focus on and account for the experiences of students during COVID-19.

Research ethics board approval was granted at Laurentian University (#6020782), McMaster University (#2538), Queen's University (GEXT-064-20; TRAQ #6030378), Trent University Durham GTA (#26358), the University of Waterloo (#42334), and Wilfrid Laurier University (#6588). At Western University and Brock University the survey was run as a quality assurance study.

Participants & Recruitment

Survey participants were recruited using a non-random sampling method to capture a voluntary response sample. On November 2, 2020, email invitations containing a link to the survey were sent to all eligible students at each participating university. Where possible, these initial invitations were followed by three reminder emails, with a final email sent on November 26, the day before the survey closed. Email invitations and reminders were sent to students' university emails and were sent from their respective student association. Some student associations also shared invitations to participate on their social media channels. OUSA advertised

the survey on social media pages but did not provide any direct invitations or links to the survey to students.

If students decided to take part in the survey, they were directed to a detailed letter of information that explained the risks and benefits of participating, as well as the steps taken to keep students' identities and responses private and confidential. They were informed that responses would only be recorded after they clicked "submit" at the end of the survey, that they could skip any question or invalidate their responses by exiting the browser at any time, that survey responses would be anonymous, and that their participation was entirely voluntary.

To incentivize participation, respondents were invited to enter a draw for a chance to win one of ten $100 gift cards of their choice. Participants were asked to provide their email addresses on the final page of the survey if they were interested in entering the draw. All voluntarily submitted email addresses were stored separately from survey responses to maintain respondents' anonymity. Prizes were administered by CCI Research Inc. OUSA never had access to students' email addresses.

Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire had 77 total parent questions and 107 total sub-questions, although not all respondents were asked every question. For example, students who responded that they were an international student in Canada on a visa were not asked questions related to domestic student financial assistance, and domestic students were not asked questions specific to international students.

The survey included several screening and demographic questions to allow for more targeted analyses based on institution, year of study, program of study, enrolment status, and demographic identification.

Background information regarding the type of neighbourhood respondents grew up in was also explored to see if differences were found among students who grew up in rural, Northern, or urban communities or on First Nations Reserves.

While many questions remained the same from previous iterations to allow for longitudinal analysis, specific changes were made to account for contextual changes and to fill in gaps from previous survey instruments. For example, questions about student financial aid were added and/or amended to capture changed made to OSAP in 2019. Some questions were amended, removed, or added to reflect the fact that students were responding to the survey while attending university virtually due to COVID-19. Questions were also added to better understand student mental health and access to supports which was missing in previous versions.

The questionnaire was uploaded to a secure online web platform hosted by CCI Research Inc. The survey tool was available in English and an option to complete the survey over the phone was provided for students requiring accommodations or assistance. The online survey tool was designed in accordance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines,[3] compatible with screen readers and that allows for respondents to view questions using larger sized fonts.

Data Analysis

All data were weighted by institutional enrolment to provide a more accurate representation of the OUSA membership at large. Data was analyzed using SPSS software which helped to organize responses and illustrate trends.

In addition to observing differences in descriptive statistics, statistical testing was used to compare means and the independence of selected variables from one another. A chi-square test for independence was

used to show the relationship between variables, and p<0.05 was used as the threshold for determining a statistically significant relationship. These data analysis techniques helped reveal meaningful patterns in the dataset.

Longitudinal analysis was also conducted on questions that remained the same from previous iterations of the survey. Trends were identified and notable contextual factors are discussed.

Limitations

The biggest limitation with this study is evident in the response rate. While the sample pool has not decreased in size from previous iterations of the survey, the response rate was significantly lower (5,697 respondents) compared to previous years (8,037 in 2017 and 9,197 in 2015). This decrease in participation rates can, in part, be attributed to survey fatigue – this survey was administered in the Fall of 2020 following and during a spike in data collection and feedback opportunities from a variety of stakeholders seeking student perspectives on the impact of COVID-19. Another factor that may have contributed to lower response rates was difficulty getting invitations to students due to barriers that delayed and/or prevented planned email blasts going out to all students.

In addition to a lower overall response rate, this study is also limited in its ability to provide a complete and accurate depiction of the experiences of Indigenous students. Due to a "history of abuse and colonialized methodology used to exploit Indigenous people…[and] a history of abuse through the collection of data from Indigenous people…students may be uncomfortable with participating in a [survey of this nature]."[4] Additionally, because the survey was only available in English, students whose first or preferred language is not English may have participated at lower rates.

There were also limitations in how questions about racial and religious identity were framed. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they identified as a racialized person prior to being asked more specific questions about their racial identity. We heard from a small number of respondents that they were concerned about this framing because while they selected that they were not a racialized person, they recognized that in many contexts they would be considered racialized. These concerns suggest that, although limited, there are some slight inaccuracies in the racial demographic results. Additionally, respondents were asked whether they wore a visible religious symbol or an item that identifies their religious affiliation or beliefs. The intention behind this framing was to explore the experiences of visibly religious students, however this means that the results of the survey do not provide information about the experiences of religious students who do not wear visible identifiers.

Low response rates overall and from specific demographic groups meant that many relationships could not be validated based on statistical significance. However, we chose to highlight notable trends, with a disclaimer where they were not statistically significant, to illustrate relationships that we felt to be important to understanding the experiences of the respondents in our sample.

Another limitation in this study, inherent in all survey research, lies in self-reported data: OUSA must rely on respondents to be honest, truthful, and forthcoming in their responses. However, while we trust that participants responded honestly, there is necessarily a risk that responses may be impacted by a misinterpretation of questions or measurement of responses, or by a social desirability bias that pushes respondents to skew their answers to match perceived desirability results.[5]

Additionally, as students were not required to answer every question, less insight is provided in certain areas where some students elected to provide no response. There was also some confusion about questions specific to campus climate given that some respondents only had experience with remote learning due to COVID-19 restrictions. Specifically, questions that asked about safety and comfort on campus did not clearly define "campus" to include or exclude online spaces, which could have resulted in different interpretations of the question.

RESULTS

SURVEY PARTICIPATION

Over 5,500 undergraduate and professional students participated in the 2020 OUSS. Out of the total number of participants, 5,697 complete responses were gathered. Surveys were considered complete if the respondent answered at least 30 percent of the questions asked.

Results were weighted by institutional enrolment to ensure results would be representative of OUSA's membership. The weighted count and proportion of participants by institution is illustrated in the table below.

A large majority (94 percent) of respondents were completing a University Bachelor's Degree; 3 percent of respondents were completing a University Undergraduate Certificate or Diploma, 2 percent were completing a Professional Degree in Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Law, or Optometry, and 1 percent were completing a credential "other" than the options listed. Respondents who selected they were completing a Master's or Doctorate Degree were disqualified and deemed ineligible as they did not meet the survey criteria to be either an undergraduate or professional student.

Participants were relatively evenly distributed across academic year: 25 percent were in their first year, 23 percent were in their second year, 25 percent were in their third year, and 23 percent were in their fourth year. Only 4 percent of respondents were in their fifth (or more) year of study. Notably, the 25 percent of respondents who indicated that they were in their first academic year would have only had the opportunity to study remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The top fields of study reported included: Health and Related Fields (19 percent); Physical and Life Sciences, and Technologies (13 percent); Social and Behavioural Sciences, and Law (12 percent); Business, Management, and Public Administration (11 percent); and Engineering, Architecture, and Related Technologies (10 percent). Eight percent of respondents selected "other" when asked about their field of study, and generally the responses given were specific subject areas that were evenly distributed among the higher-level subject areas listed above. However, some respondents indicated that they were in a general program and had not yet chosen a specific program or they were in an interdisciplinary studies program.

A large majority (96 percent) of respondents were enrolled full-time. Of the 4 percent of respondents enrolled part-time, 32 percent selected "balancing work and school" as the most applicable reason they were enrolled part-time, and 22 percent selected "personal preference." 38 percent of respondents selected "other," and the top reasons given were being on a co-op or work term; disability, health, or mental health related reasons; only needing a few credits to complete their credentials; and COVID-19 related reasons.

Participant Demographics

When asked about their immigration status, a large majority (91 percent) of respondents indicated that they were Canadian citizens, and 2 percent said they were a permanent resident. 7 percent of respondents were in-

FIGURE 1: SURVEY PARTICIPATION BY UNIVERSITY, N = 175.
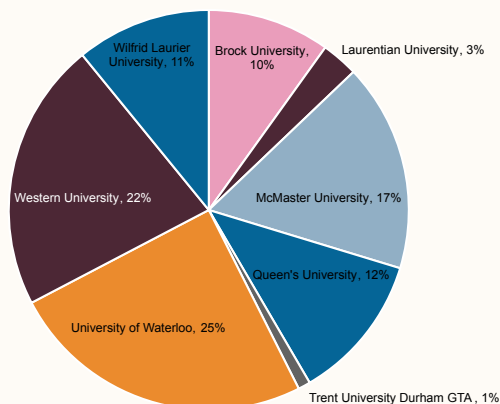
ternational students in Canada on a visa. Of the international student respondents, 17 percent were living in China when they applied to study in Canada, 15 percent were living in Canada already, and 11 percent were living in India.

79 percent of respondents were considered "traditionally-aged" students, and 20 percent were considered "mature students." As there are no standardized definitions for "traditionally-aged" or "mature" students, this classification stems from criteria used by OSAP for "independent students" based on the federal calculation, specifically whether a respondent had been out of high school for 4 or more years at the start of their study period.[6] Based on the common age for graduating high school (~17 years old), for the purpose of this survey, any respondent born before 1999 (non-inclusive) is considered a mature student. It is important to note that OSAP uses additional non-age-related criteria to assess if a student is independent, which were not considered in the development of our definition for "mature" students. These include marital status and presence of children; a consecutive 24-month work period; deceased parents; being in Extended Society Care or in the care of the Crown prior to 18 years of age; and/or receiving the Continued Care and Support for Youth program allowance from a Children's Aid Society.

Respondents were asked to select the highest post-secondary credential held by either their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) to determine whether they were a first-generation university student (i.e., a student whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) do not have a Bachelor's degree or higher education certification): 31 percent of respondents were first-generation university students, while a majority (64 percent) were not considered first-generation university students.

17 percent of respondents were classified as low-income based on the most recently available data from Statistics Canada's Low-Income Measure (2019) for

total income (before taxes).[7] Individual income was based on a 1-person household and family income was based on a 4-person household, where low-income thresholds were $28,831 and $57,662, respectively.[8] Respondents who selected at least one of the following were asked questions about their individual income: they had been out of high school for 6 years or more at the start of their study period; they had worked full-time for at least 24 months in a row at the start of their study period; their parents were deceased; they were a child in extended society care or in the care of the Crown just prior to age 18; or they were receiving Continued Care and Support for Youth program allowance from their Children's Aid Society. Respondents who selected any of these options, whose estimated income before taxes was $25,000 or less, were considered low-income. Respondents who selected none of the listed criteria above were asked about their family's income. Respondents whose estimated combined income of their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) before taxes was $50,000 or less were considered low-income.

Respondents were also asked if they had any dependents. A large majority (94 percent) said they did not have dependents, and only 2 percent said they did have dependents. Of those who did have dependents, 74 percent had either 1 or 2 dependents, 12 percent had three dependents, 9 percent had four dependents, and 5 percent had 5 or more. The most common dependents were children under 12 years old (54 percent), followed by adults and seniors (35 percent), children over the age of 18 (18 percent), and children over the age of 12 (15 percent). A majority (59 percent) of respondents whose dependents were children under the age of 18 said their dependents were not in part- or full-time childcare, while 32 percent were in part- or full-time childcare, either on (5 percent) or off (27 percent) campus.

25 percent of respondents identified as Two Spirit or LGBTQ+ and 71 percent identified as cishetero (cisgendered and heterosexual). When asked to select the term that best described their gender identity, a large majority (96 percent) selected "cis-woman" (70 percent) or "cis-man" (26 percent); 1 percent selected "non-binary,", and 2 percent selected "prefer not to say." For respondents who selected "a gender identity not listed here," responses included "agender," as well as "female" and "male" (not specifying cis or trans). When asked to select the term that best described their sexual orientation, 74 percent selected "heterosexual/straight," 13 percent selected "bisexual," 2 percent selected "gay," 2 percent selected "questioning," 2 percent selected "pansexual," 1 percent selected "lesbian," and 1 percent selected "asexual." For respondents who selected "a sexual orientation not listed here," common responses included "demisexual" and "queer."

When asked if they identified as a "person of colour" or "racialized person," 58 percent said "no" and 39 percent said "yes." Those who answered "yes" were then able

to specify by selecting a racial identity from a predetermined list. The most selected responses were "East/Southeast Asian" (48 percent), followed by "South Asian" (33 percent), Black (9 percent), and "Multiracial, Mixed-Race, or Biracial" (7 percent). Respondents could also select "other" to specify any racial identities not listed, with common responses including African, Caribbean, West Indian or Indo-Caribbean, Indian, Central Asian, and White.

Respondents were asked if they identified (or had ancestry as) an Indigenous person, which included Status and non-Status First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. A small percentage (2 percent) of respondents did identify as an Indigenous person. Of respondents who identified as a "person of colour" or "racialized person," 1 percent identified as Indigenous.

When asked if they wore a visible religious symbol or item that would identify their religious affiliation or beliefs, 11 percent said "yes" and 86 percent said "no."
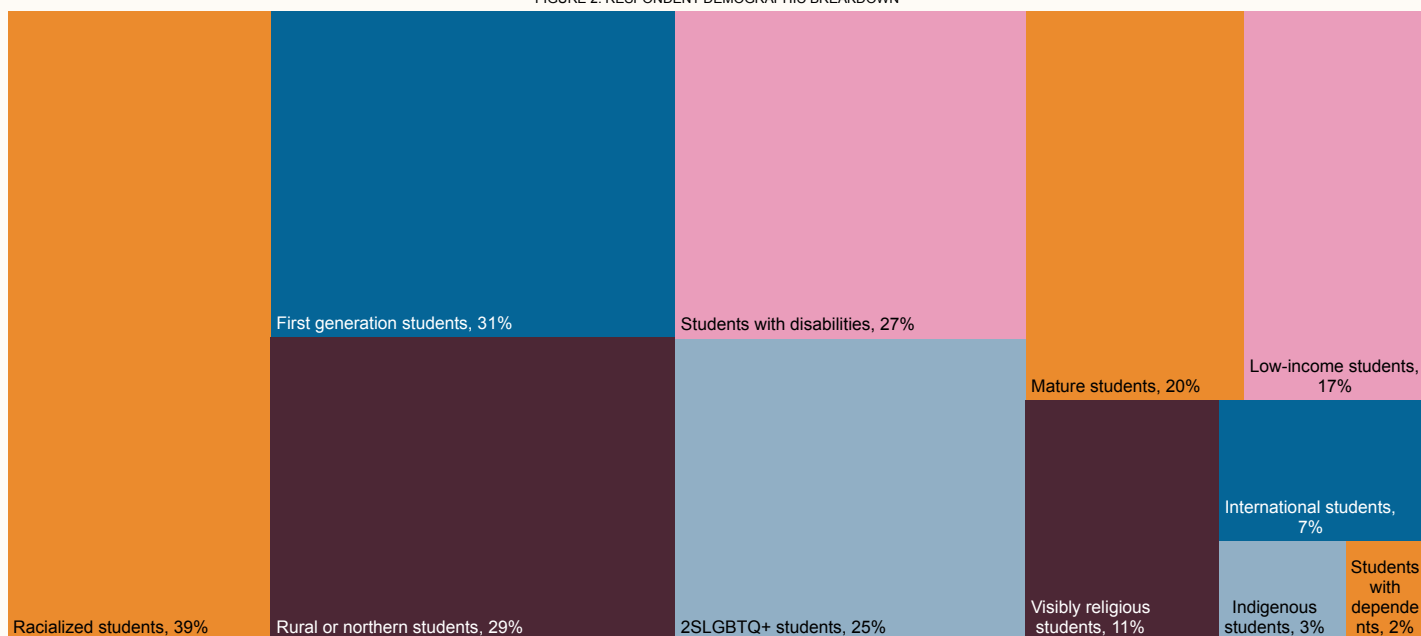
Respondents were provided with a list of disability types and asked to select any that they would describe themselves as having. 59 percent of respondents selected "no" to indicate that none of the disability types applied to them, and 27 percent selected one or more disability types from the list provided. Disability types were based on definitions from the National Educational Association of Disabled Students and included: psychiatric disability, or disability resulting from a mental illness (selected by 40 percent of respondents who selected one or more disability type), visual impairment (selected by 26 percent), intellectual or learning disability, or a disability affecting the ability to learn tasks

or process information (selected by 21 percent), physical disability, or disability affecting mobility or dexterity (selected by 5 percent), hearing impairment (selected by 5 percent), and neurological disability, or disability associated with damage to the nervous system (selected by 3 percent).[9]

When asked to select any of the responses that best described the type of community they grew up in, the most selected response was "urban community" (71 percent), followed by "rural community" (24 percent), "northern community" defined as one located in northern Ontario or other northern parts of Canada (5 percent), and First Nations Reserve (15 respondents). 4 percent of respondents selected "other" with the most common responses being "suburbs" or "suburban community," specifying a country or city outside of Canada or Ontario, and "moved around a lot."

Finally, 96 percent of respondents preferred to communicate or receive information in English. 29 respondents selected French, 2 respondents selected "I speak an Indigenous language," and 5 respondents selected Sign Language. 1 percent of respondents selected "other," with the most common responses being "Chinese" (as well as, more specifically, "Cantonese" and "Mandarin"), "Korean," and "Hindi." Less common responses included "Tamil," "Spanish," "Punjabi," and "Arabic."

FIGURE 2: RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

Racialized students, 39%

First generation students, 31%

Rural or northern students, 29%

Students with disabilities, 27%

2SLGBTQ+ students, 25%

Mature students, 20%

Low-income students, 17%

Visibly religious students, 11%

International students, 7%

Indigenous students, 3%

Students with dependents, 2%

ACCESS GROUPS

Low-Income Students

25 percent of respondents reported that the estimated combined income before taxes of their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) was over $125,000. 31 percent of respondents reported between $50,001 and $125,000. The smallest percentage of respondents, 15 percent, reported that their parent(s) and/or guardian(s) income was less than $50,000. However, of students who reported their individual estimated income for 2020 before taxes (507 respondents), 62 percent reported less than $25,000, followed by 15 percent who reported between $25,001 and $50,000, 5 percent who reported between $50,001 and $75,000, and 3 percent who reported more than $75,000.

While statistically insignificant, relationships between low-income students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed interesting trends.

Low-income students had similar enrolment statuses when compared to students who were not low-income. 97 percent of low-income students were enrolled full-time compared to 3 percent who were enrolled part-time; 98 percent of students who were not low-income were enrolled full-time compared to 2 percent who were enrolled part-time. This is consistent with general respondent trends, where 96 percent were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time and among these students who indicated they were enrolled part-time, 4 percent said it was due to affordability, and 32 percent said they were balancing work and school.

An equal percentage of low-income students indicated that they felt "very" or "somewhat" comfortable (42 percent) on campus, compared to students who were not low-income who had a greater percentage of respondents indicating they were "very" comfortable (54 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (40 percent). A greater percentage of low-income students were "not very" or "not at all" comfortable (13 percent), compared to students who were not low-income (5 percent).

The greatest percentage of low-income students indicated that they felt "somewhat" safe (40 percent), followed by "very" safe (37 percent), compared to students who were not low-income who had an equal percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" and "somewhat" safe (44 percent). A greater percentage of low-income students felt "not very" safe (10 percent), compared to 2 percent of students who were not low-income.

> **17% of students in our survey were classified as low-income**

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY INCOME BRACKET

Legend: Parental, Individual

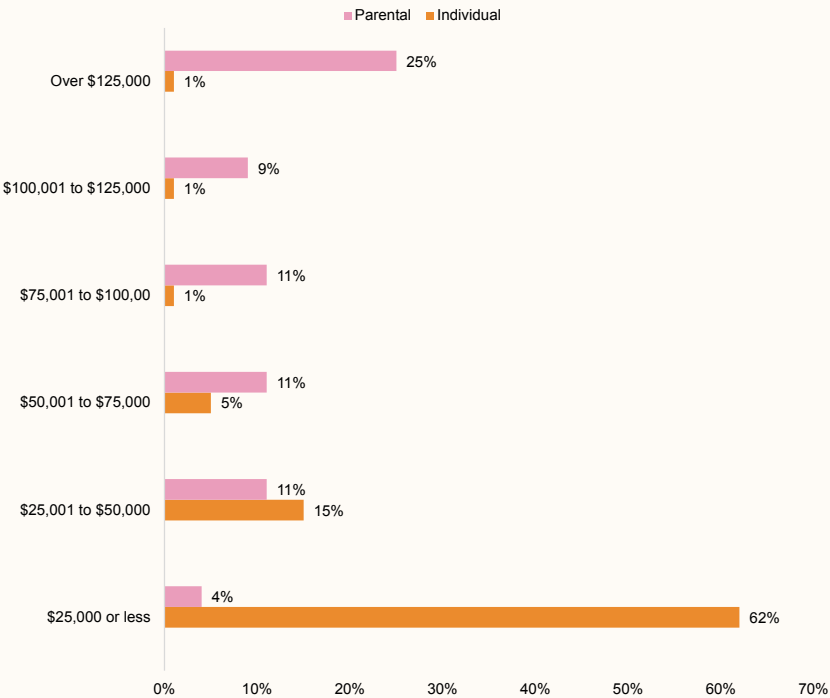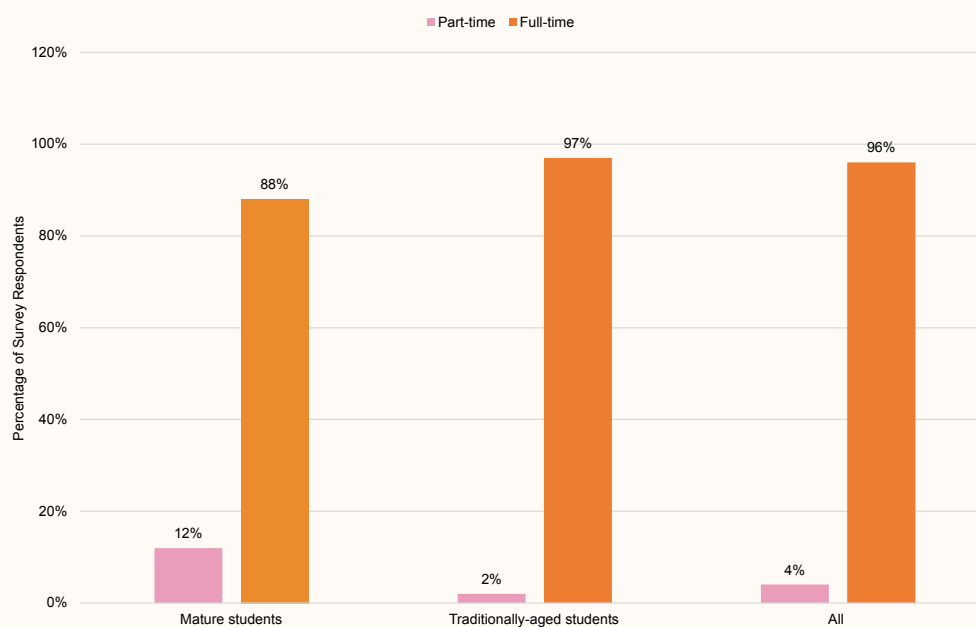| Income Bracket	Parental	Individual
Over $125,000	25%	1%
$100,001 to $125,000	9%	1%
$75,001 to $100,00	11%	1%
$50,001 to $75,000	11%	5%
$25,001 to $50,000	11%	15%
$25,000 or less	4%	62%

FIGURE 4: ENROLLMENT STATUS

Part-time ■ Full-time

First-Generation

While statistically insignificant, relationships between first-generation students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed interesting trends.

First-generation students had similar enrolment statuses when compared to students who were not first-generation: 94 percent of first-generation students were enrolled full-time compared to 6 percent who were enrolled part-time, and 96 percent of students who were not first-generation were enrolled full-time compared to 3 percent who were enrolled part-time. This is also consistent with general respondent trends: 96 percent were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time.

The greatest percentage of first-generation students said they felt "somewhat" comfortable on campus (48 percent), followed by "very" comfortable (39 percent). This trend was reversed for students who were not first-generation who had the greatest percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" comfortable on campus (53 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (40 percent). A greater percentage of first-generation students felt "not very" or "not at all" comfortable on campus (11 percent) compared to students who were not first-generation (5 percent).

The greatest percentage of first-generation students indicated that they felt "somewhat" safe (44 percent), followed by "very" safe (33 percent), compared to students who were not first-generation who had an equal percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" and "somewhat" safe (42 percent). A greater percentage of first-generation students felt "not very" safe (9 percent), compared to 5 percent of students who were not first-generation.

Mature Students

While statistically insignificant, relationships between mature students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed notable trends.

Across all demographic groups analysed, the greatest percentage of respondents who were enrolled part-time were mature students. The percentage of mature student respondents who were enrolled part-time (12 percent) was higher when compared to both general survey respondents (4 percent) and traditionally aged students (2 percent).

The greatest percentage of mature students indicated that they felt "very" comfortable (49 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (40 percent), which was like traditionally-aged students who primarily felt "very" comfortable (48 percent) and "somewhat" comfortable (43 percent). However,, a greater percentage of mature students felt "not very" or "not at all" comfortable (12 percent), compared to 7 percent of traditionally-aged students.

An equal percentage of mature students indicated that they felt "very" or "somewhat" (44 percent) safe on campus, while traditionally aged students had a greater percentage of respondents indicating they were "somewhat" safe (43 percent), followed by "very" safe (38 percent). A slightly smaller percentage of mature students felt "not very" or "not at all" safe (3 percent), compared to traditionally-aged students (6 percent).

Indigenous Students

While statistically insignificant, relationships between Indigenous students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed interesting trends.

Indigenous students continue to be underrepresented in universities in Ontario. When respondents were asked if they identified or had ancestry as an Indigenous person (including Status, non-Status, First Nations, Indian, Métis, or Inuit), only 2 percent said "yes," and only 15 respondents indicated that they grew up on a First Nations Reserve. This is consistent with previous iterations of the survey where 2 and 3 percent of respondents identified as Indigenous, and 19 and 9 respondents grew up on a First Nations Reserve in 2015 and 2017, respectively.[10] Respondents were also asked whether they identified as a "person of colour" or "racialized person." Of those who answered "yes" (39 percent), only 1 percent identified as Indigenous.

Few Indigenous respondents answered questions about their enrolment status, but of those that did, all indicated they were enrolled full-time.

Of the few Indigenous students who answered questions about their feelings of safety and comfort on campus, responses were evenly divided between "very" and "somewhat" safe/comfortable.

Racialized Students

While statistically insignificant, relationships between racialized students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed notable trends.

Racialized students had similar enrolment statuses when compared to non-racialized students: 97 percent of racialized students were enrolled full-time compared to 3 percent who were enrolled part-time, and 94 percent of non-racialized students were enrolled full-time compared to 5 percent who were enrolled part-time. This is also consistent with general respondent trends: 96 percent were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time.

A similar percentage of racialized students indicated that they felt "very" (43 percent) or "somewhat" (46 percent) comfortable on campus, compared to non-racialized students who had a greater percentage of respondents indicating they were "very" comfortable (52 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (40 percent). A close percentage of racialized and non-racialized students felt "not very" or "not at all" comfortable (8 and 6 percent, respectively).

The greatest percentage of racialized students indicated that they felt "somewhat" safe (46 percent), followed by "very" safe (32 percent), compared to non-racialized students who had a similar percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" and "somewhat" safe (43 and 41 percent, respectively). A slightly higher percentage of racialized students felt "not very" or "not at all" safe (8 percent), compared to 4 percent of non-racialized students.

Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ Students

While statistically insignificant, relationships between Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed interesting trends.

Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students had similar enrolment statuses when compared to cishetero students: 95 percent of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students were enrolled full-time compared to 5 percent who were enrolled part-time, and 95 percent of cishetero students were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time. This is also consistent with general respondent trends: 96 percent were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time.

The greatest percentage of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students said they felt "somewhat" comfortable on campus (47 percent), followed by "very" comfortable (40 percent). This trend was reversed for cishetero students who had the greatest percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" comfortable on campus (50 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (41 percent). A slightly higher percentage of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students felt "not very" or "not at all" comfortable on campus (9 percent) compared to cishetero students (7 percent).

The greatest percentage of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students indicated that they felt "somewhat" safe (48 percent), followed by "very" safe (34 percent), compared to cishetero students who had an equal percentage of respondents indicating that they felt "very" and "somewhat" safe (41 percent). A slightly higher percentage of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students felt "not very" safe (7 percent), compared to 5 percent of cishetero students who felt either "not very" of "not at all" safe.

Students with Disabilities

When provided with a list of disabilities as defined by the National Educational Association of Disabled Students,[11] 27 percent of respondents described themselves as having one or more, while 59 percent responded that they would not describe themselves as having any of the listed disabilities. The percentage of students who described themselves as having one or more of the listed disabilities increased from previous

FIGURE 5: TYPES OF DISABILITY AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS
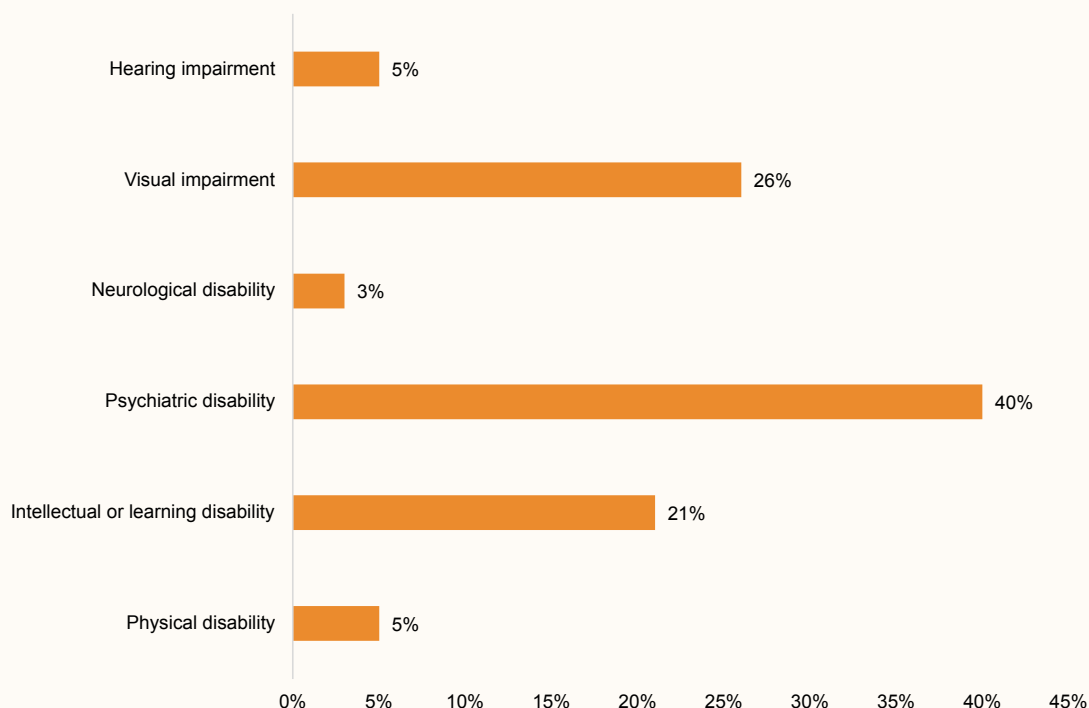
iterations of the survey where 19 percent of respondents indicated that they had some type of disability in both 2015 and 2017.[12]

Of respondents who selected one or more disabilities from the list provided, the most common type of disability selected was a psychiatric disability, or disability resulting from a mental illness (40 percent), followed by visual impairment (26 percent), intellectual or learning disability, or a disability affecting the ability to learn tasks or process information (21 percent), physical disability, or disability affecting mobility or dexterity (5 percent), hearing impairment (5 percent), and neurological disability, or disability associated with damage to the nervous system (3 percent). In 2017, 47 percent had a psychiatric disability, 23 percent had an intellectual or learning disability, 17 percent had a visual impairment, 7 percent had a physical disability, 4 percent had a neurological disability, and 4 percent had a hearing impairment. In 2015, 44 percent had a psychiatric disability, 20 percent had an intellectual or learning disability, 18 percent had a visual impairment, and 8 percent had a physical disability, 5 percent had a hearing impairment, and 4 percent had a neurological disability.[13]

While statistically insignificant, relationships between disabled students and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed notable trends.

Students with disabilities had similar enrolment statuses when compared to students who did not have a disability: 96 percent of students with disabilities were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time, and 96 percent of students who did not have a disability were enrolled full-time compared to 3 percent who were enrolled part-time. This is also consistent with general respondent trends: 96 percent were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time. Of the 4 percent of respondents who indicated that they were enrolled part-time, disability, mental health, and general health concerns were commonly shared as reasons why a respondent was enrolled part-time.

Respondents were also asked about access to academic accommodations for disability, religious, or other reasons. 22 percent of respondents had requested an academic accommodation of some kind, of which 60 percent received an academic accommodation for disability support. Of the 10 percent of respondents who did not receive their requested academic accommodation, 39 percent were for disability support.

An equal percentage of students with disabilities indicated that they felt "very" (45 percent) or "somewhat" (45 percent) comfortable on campus, compared to students who did not have a disability who had a greater percentage of respondents indicating they were "very" comfortable (51 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (41 percent). A greater percentage of students with disabilities were "not very" or "not at all" comfortable (8 percent), compared to students who did not have a disability (5 percent).

The greatest percentage of students with a disability indicated that they felt "somewhat" safe (45 percent), followed by "very" safe (38 percent), compared to students who did not have a disability who had an equal percentage of respondents indicating that they

felt "very" and "somewhat" safe (41 percent). A slightly greater percentage of students with disabilities felt "not very" safe (6 percent), compared to 4 percent of students who did not have a disability.

While statistically insignificant, relationships between students from remote communities and enrolment, comfort levels, and safety showed interesting trends. Notably, the following results on safety and comfort are not disaggregated by type of institution. Therefore, they discuss students from remote communities, but it is possible that these students may be attending a northern institution or a southern institution in an urban region, thereby affecting comfort and safety levels.

Students who grew up in rural or northern communities, or on a First Nations Reserve had similar enrolment statuses when compared to students who grew up in urban centres: 93 percent of students who grew up in rural or northern communities, or on a First Nations Reserve were enrolled full-time compared to 7 percent who were enrolled part-time, and 96 percent of students who grew up in urban centres were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time. This is also consistent with general respondent trends: 96 percent were enrolled full-time compared to 4 percent who were enrolled part-time.

A similar percentage of students who grew up in rural or northern communities, or on a First Nations Reserve indicated that they felt "very" (47 percent) or "somewhat" (44 percent) comfortable on campus, compared to students who grew up in an urban centre who had a greater percentage of respondents indicating they were "very" comfortable (51 percent), followed by "somewhat" comfortable (40 percent). A slightly lower percentage of students who grew up in rural or northern communities, or on a First Nations Reserve were "not very" or "not at all" comfortable (6 percent), compared to students who grew up in an urban centre (8 percent).

Students who grew up in rural or northern communities, or on a First Nations Reserve, most commonly indicated that they felt "somewhat" (44 percent) or "very" safe (39 percent) safe. This was similar for students who grew up in an urban centre who also felt primarily "somewhat" (43 percent) or "very" (40 percent) safe. A similar proportion of students who grew up in rural or northern communities, or on a First Nations Reserve felt "not very" or "not at all" safe (4 percent) compared to respondents who grew up in an urban centre (5 percent).

While statistically insignificant, relationships between international students and comfort/safety levels showed notable trends.

A similar percentage of international and domestic students indicated that they felt "very" comfortable on their university campus (50 and 47 percent, respectively). However, fewer international students felt "somewhat" comfortable (33 percent) compared to domestic students (42 percent), and a greater percentage of international students felt "not that" comfortable (8 percent) compared to domestic students (5 percent). 0 percent of international students felt "not at all" comfortable, while 2 percent of domestic students felt "not at all" comfortable.
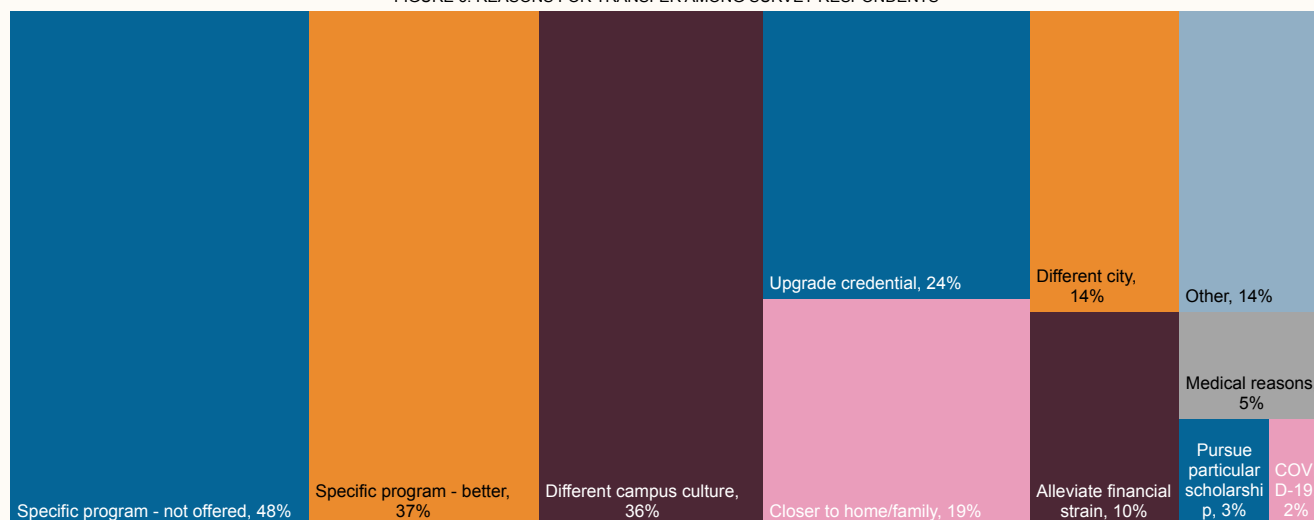
International students primarily indicated that they felt "very" safe on campus (46 percent) followed by "somewhat" safe (36 percent), compared to domestic students who primarily indicated that they felt "somewhat" safe on campus (43 percent) followed by "very" safe (38 percent). More domestic students felt "not that" or "not at all" safe (4 and 1 percent), than international students (0 percent). However, a greater percentage of international students indicated that they were "not sure" how safe they felt on campus (18 percent) compared to domestic students (11 percent).

CREDIT TRANSFER

15 percent of student respondents reported that they had transferred credits to their current program or institution, while 85 percent had not. This is consistent with trends from previous iterations of this survey where 13 and 11 percent of respondent reported having transferred credits in 2015 and 2017, respectively.[14] No trends emerged indicating any statistically significant relationships between student demographics or enrolment status and whether a student had transferred credits.

A majority of transfer students moved between universities (72 percent), while 30 percent transferred from a college and 1 percent from an Indigenous Institute, which was also consistent with trends from previous iterations of this survey.[15]

Specific program - not offered, 48%

Specific program - better, 37%

Different campus culture, 36%

Upgrade credential, 24%

Closer to home/family, 19%

Different city, 14%

Alleviate financial strain, 10%

Other, 14%

Medical reasons, 5%

Pursue particular scholarship, 3%

COVID-19, 2%

Most transfer students reported that they had transferred supplementary credits from another institution (63 percent), 28 percent had transferred from another institution entirely, and 9 percent transferred credits they had earned on exchange. This differs from previous iterations of this survey where transferring from another institution entirely was the most commonly reported transfer experience (47 percent in 2015 and 2017), followed by transferring supplementary credits earned at another institution (35 percent in 2015 and 36 percent in 2017), and least commonly, transferring credits earned on exchange (17 percent in 2015 and 2017).[16]

Of students who had transferred credits, 15 percent reported that their transfer was part of a bridging program or pathway. A majority of students who transferred institutions did so within Ontario (80 percent) and 20 percent transferred from outside of Ontario. Among intra-provincial transfers, this result is consistent with the 2015 iteration of the survey (81 percent), however it is a slight decrease from the 2017 iteration of the survey (87 percent).[17]

The most common reasons for transferring to a different institution were related to their program: either to access a specific program not offered at their previous institution (48 percent) or to access a specific program that the student perceived to be better at a different institution (37 percent). This was followed by wanting a different campus culture (36 percent), wanting to upgrade credentials (24 percent), and wanting to be closer to home or family (19 percent). Students also transferred because they wanted to live in a different city (14 percent), to alleviate financial strain (10 percent), for medical reasons (5 percent) or a particular scholarship (3 percent), and due to COVID-19 (2 percent). These figures are generally higher than those seen in the 2015 and 2017 versions of the OUSS, except for reasons related to upgrading credentials or wanting

closer proximity to home or family, which were lower in the current iteration of the survey.[18]

Over half of transfer students (54 percent) reported that all or nearly all the credits they tried to transfer were recognized by their new institution. 16 percent of transfer students reported that 60 to 80 percent of their credits were recognized; 25 percent reported that 20 to 40 percent of their credits were recognized; and 5 percent reported that none or nearly none of their credits were recognized. This is consistent with responses to previous iterations of this survey where just over 50 percent reported that all or almost all their credits were recognized, and 6 percent and 8 percent reported that none or nearly none of their credits were recognized in 2020 compared to 2015 and 2017, respectively.[19]

A relatively equal percentage of transfer students were satisfied with the rationale they were given for why some or all of their credits were non-transferrable (30 percent) compared to those who were unsatisfied (36 percent) or not given a rationale (34 percent). This is a change from 2017 when 68 percent of respondents were not given a clear rationale.[20] The most common reasons that were given to those students who were told that some or all of their credits were non-transferrable were that: there were different course requirements or course content (16.8 percent); their previous courses were not relevant to the new program (12.3 percent); and there was a cap on the number of credits that could be transferred for the new program (10.4 percent).

A small minority of transfer students (5 percent) reported having used ONTransfer.ca to guide or inform their credit transfer process, with 76 percent saying they did not use this resource, and 19 percent indicating that they were unsure if they had or not. This is consistent with responses to the 2017 iteration of this survey where less than 10 percent of transfer students reported using ONTransfer.ca, 79 percent did not use

the resource, and 13 percent were unsure.[21] Of those who did use ONTransfer.ca, 34 percent found it very helpful, 41 percent found it somewhat helpful, and 28 percent did not find it helpful. This is consistent with responses to the 2017 iteration of the survey where 34 percent of students who had used ONTransfer.ca found it very helpful and 54 percent found it somewhat helpful.[22]

STUDENT HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION

Compared to previous iterations of this survey, questions about student housing were modified to consider the impact of COVID-19 on living arrangements. 59 percent of respondents indicated that they were not looking for housing this year, and 65 percent of these respondents attributed this to the fact that they already had housing, although it is unclear if this was because many students returned to their homes of origin at the onset of the pandemic and subsequent campus closures. Among those who were looking for housing, 71 percent stated they had secured off-campus housing, which is up from the 2015 and 2017 surveys where 60 percent and 56 percent reported securing off-campus housing, respectively.[23] The current survey saw 14 percent of students reporting that they had secured housing on-campus, down from the previous versions of OUSS with 17 percent reporting this in 2015 and 24 percent reporting this in 2017.[24] 53 percent of students were renting their residence while 47 percent were not.

51 percent of respondents attribute their inability to secure housing to COVID-19 restrictions, while 28 percent cite cost as their primary reason. 58 percent of students in our sample stated that they were familiar with their rights and responsibilities as a tenant under the Residential Tenancies Act, while 42 percent stated that they did not.

When looking at housing among international students, it is important to note that there was no statistically significant relationship between the two. However, international students were evenly distributed in their responses when asked if they were looking for housing during the 2020-21 academic year. 20 percent of international students stated that they were unable to secure housing; this figure was 14.8 percent for students who identify as Canadian citizens. Among students who were not looking for housing, a majority of international students attributed this to the fact that they already had housing, a similar pattern seen with students who identify as Canadian citizens.

Results pertaining to transit were qualitative in nature. When asked about ways in which the university experience could be improved, students suggested making mandatory bus pass fees optional (e.g., the ability to opt out), or reducing these fees. Additionally, students discussed having more accessible transit options such as a bus network that connects universities with one another, or transit routes that connect large Ontario cities directly to campuses.

Among the 53% of students renting their residence, 42% were unfamiliar with their rights and responsibilities according to the Residential Tenancies Act

FIGURE 7: SURVEY RESPONDENTS REASONS FOR INABILITY TO SECURE HOUSING

Prefer not to say 2%

Other 18%

Discrimintation 0%

COVID-19 52%

Cost 28%
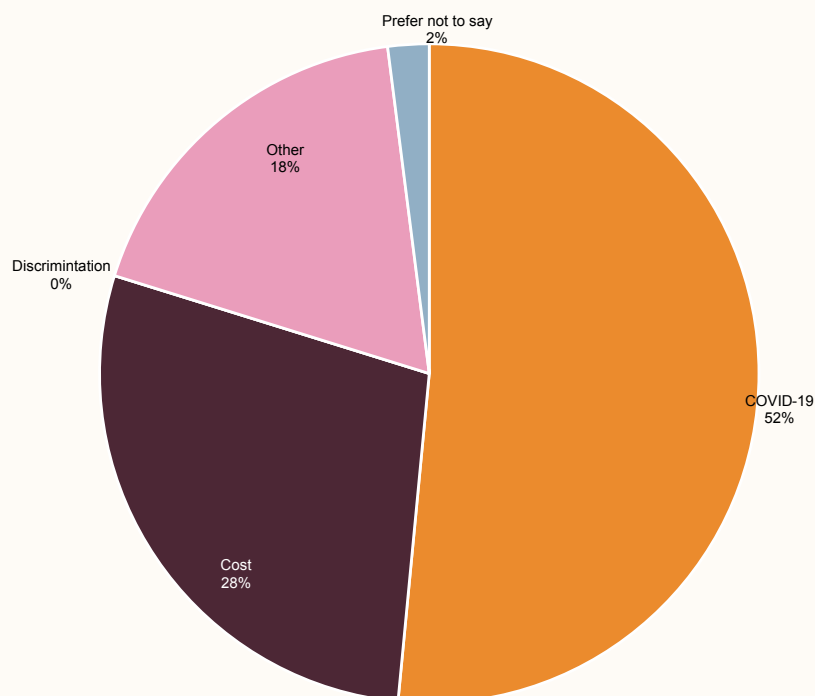
Access to post-secondary, has improved significantly in recent years. Between 2004 and 2015, post-secondary enrolment grew approximately 31 percent, from 555,000 to 725,000.[25] However, there is little evidence that this increase in overall enrolment has made it easier for disadvantaged students to access post-secondary education.[26] Several groups in Ontario—including students from low-income families, first-generation students, racialized and Indigenous students, students from rural and northern communities, students from single-parent families, and students with disabilities—remain underrepresented within the province's post-secondary institutions.

Low-Income

Access to post-secondary for low-income students can be largely associated with financial barriers. As a part of the series of reports based on this survey data, OUSA's report on affordability highlights how low-income students are disadvantaged through financial aid programs that hinder access to their education, such as OSAP.[27] Notably, the 2019 changes to OSAP disproportionately affected low-income students by reducing the amount of grants they received and displacing at least 10 percent of their financial aid into loans.[28] Further, there was a reduction in OSAP's budget between 2019 and 2020, which lessened the total amount of funding provided to low-income students than in previous years.[29] University education is undeniably becoming more expensive, with domestic tuition rates in Ontario rising 16 percent over the past 10 years.[30] It is critical that investments to student financial aid increase in tandem with rising tuition costs, enhancing the accessibility of education for low-income students. This is especially salient knowing that five years after graduation, students from low-income backgrounds who graduated with a university degree earned 165 percent more than those who did not obtain a university degree, further exemplifying the importance of ensuring the accessibility of post-secondary education for fruitful and sustainable outcomes.[31] Based on combined parental and/or guardian income, 18 percent of students identified as low-income in the 2015 iteration of our survey, compared to 16 percent in 2017 and 15 percent in the current survey, indicating a small but prevalent decrease in the number of low-income students in post-secondary education.[32]

While statistically insignificant, our results revealed that 42 percent of low-income students reported feeling "very" comfortable, compared to 54 percent of non-low-income students. This could be attributed to the costs associated with the social experience of post-secondary education. While expenses mainly centre around academic-related costs, there are several expenses that come from genuinely enjoying a student's post-secondary experience, like on- and off-campus social events. A student in a financially precarious place may not feel as comfortable engaging in these opportunities as readily as their peers, lowering their access to non-academic spheres of post-secondary. A survey at the University of Michigan found that their undergraduate students spent $6,406 for social expenses over the course of their four-year degree, totalling about $200 per month.[33] While this is not within the Canadian context, an online financial planning tool provided by the University of Toronto estimates and automatically allocates a similar figure of $150 per month for entertainment purposes.[34] In addition, our survey found that 32 percent of students who worked in-study did so

in order to have more disposable income during their studies, indicating a desire for students to have savings intended for non-academic purposes.[35] Consequently, conversations about access to post-secondary must consider access to all aspects of post-secondary education as students attempt to have a comprehensive and enjoyable experience.

First-Generation

The trends in our survey indicated that percentages of first-generation students who are "very" comfortable on campus are lower than those who are not first-generation students. This finding is supported by external research, with degree attainment by other family members acting as a strong indicator for enrolment, retention, and graduation rates. For example, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) found a 21 percent attainment gap between first-generation and non-first-generation students for the 25-34 age cohort in Ontario.[36] Additionally, they found that prospective first-generation students were more likely to expect that they would not complete a post-secondary education, with 26 percent of youth feeling this way versus 8 percent of youth.[37] Despite these concerning numbers, HEQCO found that upon completion of a degree, first-generation students fare just as well as their continuing-generation counterparts in regards to salary and working benefits like pensions, job security, and retirement savings.[38] Thus, it is important that first-generation students are adequately supported in their transition to post-secondary education in order to ensure their credential attainment and future success. The provincial government has attempted to increase access to first-generation students through targeted OSAP funding via the Ontario First Generation Bursary, an institutionally-determined award ranging between $1,000-$3,500.[39] HEQCO has suggested that while well-intentioned, targeted funding should instead be directed at the K-12 sector in order to primarily facilitate high school completion.[40] Proactive measures that intervene before students enter post-secondary is congruent with Raymond Padilla's work on "heuristic knowledge" which suggests that students require an understanding of campus academic processes, operations, and deadlines as pre-emptively as possible in order to increase retention and promote successful outcomes.[41] This knowledge is typically transferred informally and while admitted in the K-12 sector, students are more likely to receive this from parents and/or guardians. Since first-generation students are coming from households without experience in post-secondary, they may be less equipped to navigate the com-

plicated structures of post-secondary education, thus limiting their access.

Access to post-secondary was made more challenging for first-generation students during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially due to the rapid transition to online learning. A U.S. survey by the Student Experience in the Research University Consortium found that first-generation students faced more struggles in adapting to online learning than continuing-generation students, such as a lack of appropriate study spaces, difficulty attending online classes at scheduled times, lack of appropriate and necessary technology, and limited familiarity with technological tools.[42] This exemplifies the access gaps that exist for first-generation students as they complete post-secondary and attention to this population group is needed to ensure that no student is left behind in accessing their education.

Mature Students

The findings from our survey showcase that mature students are disproportionately enrolled in part-time studies than traditionally-aged students, which aligns with institutional policies and is indicative of the personal circumstances faced by mature students. Post-secondary institutions across the province may encourage or mandate that mature students enrol in part-time studies, such as Brock, Western, and Wilfrid Laurier University.[43] Additionally, mature students likely hold various responsibilities outside of their academic ones, such as dependent care and employment. The term "role overload" has been used to describe the several commitments mature students balance, and often affects women more due to the increased likelihood of having domestic and caregiving responsibilities.[44]

"[Having] entered university as a mature student, I felt like the orientation was not inclusive of me. It made me feel uncomfortable and like I did not belong because I was 4-5 years older."

Access to post-secondary education for mature students is intertwined with financial barriers. Institutional financial aid is minimal in its offerings to mature students and have low monetary value compared to the cost of education, with many institutions offering anywhere between $250-$1,000. Searching for available awards often yields inaccessible results with options being hidden behind an online portal that users must have an account to view, or with public results communicating "unknown" values for awards. In addition, awards for mature students are typically restricted to a certain program or year of study. This severely limits access for mature students, who often have increased financial commitments due to higher housing costs and dependent care-related costs. For example, when asked about ideas to improve the university system in Ontario, one respondent told us, "More available grants and bursaries for mature students with children who are trying to build a better life after switching career paths. I have applied to 10 plus grants and bursaries this year alone and did not receive any."

Social barriers also impede post-secondary access for mature students because of the lack of orientation or support programs that adequately facilitate their transition and increase their on-campus comfort. These programs contribute to a mature students' sense of belonging, and consequently influence academic achievement and social-emotional processing.[45] Interestingly, research has shown that mature students enter post-secondary education with confidence in their academic capabilities and are eager to complete their education. Therefore, implementing orientation and transition programs that meet the social needs of mature students will ensure that they can more equitably participate with their peers and foster a sense of inclusivity within the campus community.

Indigenous Students

All Indigenous students should have equal access to university, however the data collected from Indigenous students who took our survey reaffirms a concerning trend: Indigenous students continue to be one of the most underrepresented groups within Canadian higher education. When respondents were asked if they identified or had ancestry as an Indigenous person, only 2 percent of respondents said yes. The 2015 and 2017 iterations of the survey showed similar figures, with the number of Indigenous respondents being roughly 2-3 percent.[46] While the university attainment rate for Indigenous students has risen over the years, so has

the attainment rate for non-Indigenous students creating a persistent gap between the two groups.[47]

Several respondents spoke about feeling uncomfortable due to the campus culture and treatment of Indigenous Peoples on their campus, which can deter many Indigenous youth from seeking post-secondary. Post-secondary institutions approach Indigenous history from an academic and historic lens, but seemingly forget to acknowledge the lived experience and intergenerational trauma many Indigenous people live with today. This perpetuates a system of mistreatment towards Indigenous students and supports a culture of disrespect against Indigenous Peoples. Institutions can work to create safe spaces for Indigenous students and teach non-Indigenous students about their history, but without the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, institutions are perpetuating a system of colonial violence against Indigenous students. Therefore, OUSA recommends that the provincial government, in collaboration with Indigenous stakeholders and student leaders, develop, publish, and honour a plan to consult with, receive consent from, and follow Indigenous leadership when engaging in any and all work related to Indigenous Peoples at post-secondary institutions, including when implementing the recommendations set out in this paper.

"We talk about Indigenous issues cursorily in every course, but the course content fails to integrate respect for Indigenous perspectives/history."

An additional barrier Indigenous students face when trying to access post-secondary is the outdated curriculum, and lack of awareness from instructors and faculty members of Canada's historical mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples. Decolonization and Indigenization of colonial systems and spaces are often left to Indigenous Peoples with little to no support. On campuses, non-Indigenous students should have the necessary exposure and resources to become aware of Indigenous ways of learning and understanding to become informed allies. The work of educating non-Indigenous people must not fall on Indigenous Peoples. Post-secondary institutions often place the responsibility for all Indigenous outcomes and projects on Indigenous

Peoples, including faculty, staff, and often students, without adequate support or compensation. This contributes to the overworking and tokenization of Indigenous Peoples in post-secondary spaces and absolves non-Indigenous people of their responsibility. Non-Indigenous allies must do the work to decolonize their minds and perspectives and understand how colonialism and the genocide of Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island have benefitted their ancestry and painted the world we live in today. In ensuring Indigenous students have access to safe spaces, free of discrimination and outdated approaches to academia, the provincial government should provide funding to post-secondary institutions to hire Indigenous educators to develop and implement recurring, mandatory training and ongoing education opportunities for non-Indigenous students, staff, and faculty.

Furthermore, Indigenous students should feel safe being on campus and not have to worry about experiencing racism, discrimination, or engaging with statues and/or symbols that commemorate individuals who have caused significant harm to Indigenous Peoples. These efforts cannot go without institutional dedication to eradicate the many colonial figures, labels, names, and symbols on campuses. Examples of harmful colonial figures, labels, names, and symbols on campuses include, but are not limited to the names of institutions, physical spaces, and labels of any kind that pay tribute to colonial figures or individuals who harmed and/or negatively impacted Indigenous Peoples as well as statues, paintings, and photographs that refer to colonization, or that contain harmful symbolism or reference colonial figures and harmful actions. These symbols act as physical reminders of a complacent academic and campus culture that helps to sustain and support a discriminatory environment that perpetuates an anti-Indigenous culture. Without dedicated efforts to tear down these symbols, each university represents the blatant impassivity in perpetuating an anti-Indigenous environment. Our recommendation is for the provincial government to develop guidelines to support post-secondary institutions to remove colonial and racist symbols on campuses in order to meet their human rights obligations in accordance with the Ontario Human Rights Commission policy on the discriminatory display of names, words, and images.

Racialized Students

Feelings of comfort and safety are significant determinants of access to post-secondary education, as they contribute to the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of students. In our survey, racialized students generally felt less comfortable and safe on campus, which can hinder their access to many areas of post-secondary campuses from the classroom to residences, to athletics.

A report from Wilfrid Laurier University unveiled the persistent ways in which racism manifests in campus spaces. 40.5 percent of participants in that survey reported experiencing racism on a daily to monthly basis, with the most common location being in the classroom, and the second most common location being in residence.[48] Students reported that these experiences significantly impacted other areas of their life, notably their mental health, with one participant reporting anxiety attacks at the thought of re-applying for post-secondary.[49] The Anti-Racism Working Group at Western University also released a report summarizing stories they heard from various ethno-cultural groups on campus, and found that fear, ignorance, and racial microaggressions were common themes experienced by these groups.[50] These experiences of harm and discrimination contribute to the inaccessibility of campus spaces because students avoid vocalizing their concerns out of fear of losing something or being typecast.[51] These feelings of psychological distress evidently pose a risk to access the benefits and opportunities that come with post-secondary.

"Train your staff and students about [diversity and equity] and address the systemic racism embedded within your policies, decrease barriers and increase accessibility to positions and opportunities."

Notably, while these institutional reports act as quantifiable evidence, experiences of racism have been anecdotally documented for many years by students on a variety of campuses, especially through the use of social media. One respondent stated that, "BIPOC students had to take to social media with their experiences with racism on campus to be taken seriously by the public..." The revelations of racism through these accounts hold immense value and must be treated as such when

considering incidences of racism on campus. Ignoring these reports only further contributes to inaccessibility of post-secondary education in Ontario. It is clear that racism inhibits post-secondary access and to mitigate this, OUSA advocates for mandatory, evidence-based, trauma-informed training for student-facing staff in order to enhance cultural sensitivity and promote a positive classroom environment.[52]

Accessibility also applies to extracurricular activities, or those intertwined with academics, like athletics. The Ontario University Athletics (OUA) released a report in 2021 that, unsurprising to many, revealed university sports to be overwhelmingly white among athletes, coaches, and administrators.[53] The systemic exclusion of racialized athletes has serious impacts, considering that university athletics act as a financially supportive pathway to access post-secondary education. The report specifically designates player "non-recruitment" as an example of racism, where students from white, middle- to upper-class backgrounds have increased likelihoods of being selected to play for institutions.[54] Thus, access to post-secondary education for racialized students extends to many areas beyond academics.

Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ Students

Since the last iteration of the OUSS survey, there has been an increase in the number of students who self-identified with the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ community. In 2017, 12 percent of respondents identified with the LGBTQ+ community, compared to 25 percent in 2020.[55] This is a significant jump and signals a societal shift towards LGBTQ+ students feeling more comfortable in self-identifying within the Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ community. Over the past decade there has been a growing awareness of new gender identities, sexualities, and intersecting identities. Intersecting identities refers to the multiple, intertwined factors that make up the dynamic and fluid nature of an individual's identity.[56] The expansion of terms and increased awareness of the intersecting identities within the LGBTQ+ community could be one of the many reasons there was a large jump in LGBTQ+ respondents.

The data collected suggest that there is a desperate need for safe(r) spaces on campus for LGBTQ+ students. 47 percent of respondents who identified as Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ reported feeling "somewhat" safe on their university campuses. Comparatively, 50 percent of cis-hetero students reported feeling "very" safe on their university campus. While the margin between the two figures is not wide, there are clearly systemic and institutional barriers that exist on campuses that

creates an uncomfortable and unsafe feeling for queer students. Our findings are consistent with research conducted by Statistics Canada on the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in Canada broadly. Their 2019 survey on *Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population* found that one in ten students who identify as LGBTQ+ experienced discrimination based on sexual orientation or assumed sexual orientation in a post-secondary setting in the past 12 months, compared with 1.2 percent of heterosexual students.[57] On many university campuses, Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students don't have consistent access to safe spaces secluded from the broader university community. The spaces that are available, such as Pride Centres often run by student unions, can be difficult to locate and are at times not promoted well-enough due to lack of resources. Visibility queer physical spaces on campus are integral to support Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ students feel welcome, support, and comfortable on campus.

> *"There were multiple instances of injustice towards women, the LGBTQ+ community and Indigenous peoples. The use of slurs is prominent and the lack of diversity on campus makes students in these groups feel unsafe."*

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities face unique challenges while navigating higher education. These challenges include everything from financial barriers due to accessibility needs, to disability-based discrimination. In ensuring all students have equal access to succeed in university, the unique challenges of students with disabilities must be prioritized. As previously mentioned, there was an 8 percent increase in students who identified as having a disability between the 2017 and 2020 iterations of our survey. Historically, the term disability has been very narrow but over the past two decades the term has widened in scope. As seen with the definitions created by the National Education Association of Disabled Students (NEADS), the term disability is widely defined and encompasses a range of behaviors

and conditions that are not always visible. As the definition of "disability" continues to widen in scope, it is expected that more students will fall into this category and will require accommodations to better support their post-secondary journey.

The law requires post-secondary institutions to provide students with accommodations up to the point of undue hardship. While hardships or disabilities may prevent significant barriers to a student's learning experience, they may not be considered as "undue hardship" and meet the threshold for accommodation. There are three criteria in place to assess whether the point of undue hardship has been met, namely: cost; outside sources of funding, if any; and health and safety requirements, if any.[58] Regardless of whether a student's need meets this threshold, institutions should still be required to find a solution to improve their academic experience. Of the 22 percent of respondents who requested academic accommodation, 39 percent did not receive their requested academic accommodation. This illustrates the in-accessibility of post-secondary as it stands, as there are not only a significant number of students seeking accommodation, but an equally high number of students who aren't receiving any accommodation that is necessary for their success.

> *"The attitudes towards disabled people in university are very disturbing and frustrating. I have had my disability questioned by professors, I've been told I'm 'so lucky to have the advantages of accommodations,' one professor told me I could not utilize my accommodations because it was unfair to the other students."*

Part of the issue surrounding denied academic accommodations is the campus climate and attitudes surrounding students with disabilities. NEADS has done research in this area and speaks to the "gatekeeper" function that faculty and staff play at institutions. These individuals assess whether accommodations should be made, but they often do not have the training and experience to effectively assess a student's request and suggest pathways for accommodation.[59] While having a system of formal accommodations through an institution is ideal, modifying how institutions approach teaching and learning would decrease the number of students submitting accommodation requests. At the moment, classrooms don't have the infrastructure to accommodate virtual learning and instructors and teaching assistants are often not trained or aware of how to effectively modify their course to accommodate the various needs of students. Reimagining how institutions approach teaching can significantly benefit the increasing number of students in post-secondary living with a disability.

Community

While our survey found similar percentages of comfort and safety between those from rural and northern communities and those who grew up on a First Nation Reserve, there are several barriers to access that can impede participation in post-secondary education for these students.

The success of online learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was severely contingent on students' ability to access reliable internet and technology. For students who had to move back to rural and/or northern communities, these tools may not have been sufficient to fully engage with their education as they would have previously been on campus. Rural and northern communities lack sufficient high-speed broadband access and typically face increased costs when they do gain access to this level of connectivity. Adequate internet speeds have been operationalized at 50/10 Mbps, and a 2019 report from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission found that urban communities in Ontario have 12 to 13 providers servicing the internet at this speed, while rural communities in Ontario have just two to five providers.[60] Across Canada, only 45.6 percent of rural communities have access to broadband at 50/10 Mbps, and pay an average of $88.02 per month which is approximately $16 more than those in urban centres.[61] There is a clear disparity in the infrastructure needed to facilitate online learning for students from these communities, and in a world where conversations about flexible learning and working models have become widespread, there is a push to close this digital divide. While financial commitments to widen broadband access have been announced by both the federal and

provincial governments, OUSA also recommends that a Technology Accessibility Grant be open to rural and/or northern OSAP-eligible students.

Access for rural and northern communities, as well as those who grew up on First Nations Reserves, is also influenced by physical proximity, and thus, inter-regional transit that is affordable, timely, and environmentally conscious remains important to students. As will be discussed in the following Student Housing and Transportation section, cuts to inter-regional transit routes have limited options and access for students to commute or visit their community of origin. Being able to depend on transit companies and routes that efficiently carry students between various provincial communities and their institution will pave the way for increased accessibility of post-secondary education.

"I've had instances where my internet is cut out for a day, or my tests take extra-long to write because of internet speed. (I live in a rural area). It would be nice to have extra time on tests in case I run into these issues."

International Students

According to Statistics Canada, international undergraduate tuition in Ontario was an average of $38,276 in 2019-20, almost 40 percent higher than what it was just four years prior in 2015-16.[62] Ever since international student tuition was deregulated in 1996, it has become incredibly difficult for international students to predict the annual cost of tuition.[63] Over the past five years, the number of international students at Ontario institutions more than doubled, rising from 168,606 in 2015-16 to 235,422 in 2019-20.[64] As international student tuition continues to rise, international students are struggling to pay for their education. Several respondents reported that international students' tuition is incredibly high, especially when compared to the rates that domestic students pay. One of the respondents stated that "Tuition, especially when the system is all online due to COVID, is very high, specifically for

international students and there aren't as many options as possible for financial assistance." For example, for the 2021-22 school year the average domestic student will pay $6,693 and comparatively, the average international student will pay $33,623.[65]

"The international visa tuition has been raised by 5-8% every single term (not year). It makes the students struggle since that is a large amount of extra money."

An underlying contributor to the exorbitant tuition rates for international students is the lack of funding the province provides post-secondary institutions. When the government deregulated international student tuition rates in 1996, provincial operating grants made up approximately 60 percent of university operating budgets;[66] for the 2019-20 school year, provincial operating grants made up 32 percent of a university's operating budget.[67] As a result, universities have looked elsewhere to acquire the funds they need, and this burden has befallen international students. This would explain why the total revenue from international students has doubled from $620 million to $1.28 billion over the past decade.[68] Universities are relying on tuition revenue from international students to fill financial gaps within their institution, gaps the provincial government should be filling. Institutions using international students to fill budget gaps is not only inequitable, as their domestic counterparts do not pay nearly the same amount for the same education, but it also ignores the additional fees on top of tuition, such as food and housing, that international students must pay. The quality and availability of affordable housing is an issue for all students, but international students have additional risks associated with finding housing due to language and cultural barriers, as well as a lack of familiarity with their legal rights and obligations as a tenant. As a result, international students may be misled into renting a home that isn't suitable to be lived in or paying exorbitant fees for a room. The transition for international students coming to Ontario is already stressful due to the cultural differences. In retaining the high-skilled international students who come to Cana-

da for higher education, international students need to be given stability and predictability and deserve access to a post-secondary system that is high-quality, affordable and predictable.
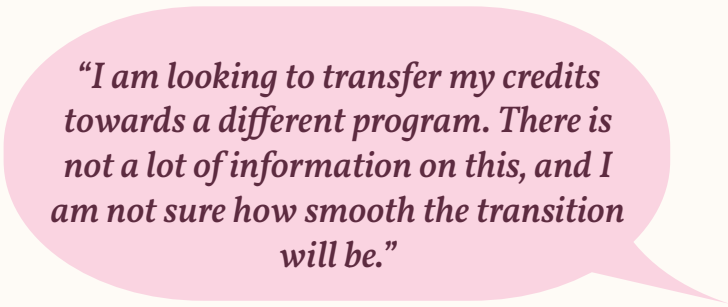
Going further, a current barrier for many international students is learning in an online environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent said "As an international student, what I want to learn from my university time is communicating skills and experience more from another culture. Online courses cannot give such experience to me." Many international students chose to study abroad not only for the educational opportunities, but for the chance to immerse themselves in another culture. Prior to COVID, the cross-cultural transition was a barrier, with researchers finding that international students have a challenging time adjusting to the social norms and customs of their host country.[69] In a digital environment, where everything is done through a screen, the adjustment is significantly harder as there are not as many opportunities to fully immerse oneself in the host country's traditions and norms. This greatly affects the access to a traditional post-secondary experience for many international students, as they are losing out on the full experience of being an international student, all while paying the same price.

CREDIT TRANSFER

Throughout a student's post-secondary career, they may choose to transfer programs or schools to achieve financial, personal, educational and/or career goals. Having a strong transfer and credit recognition system that supports the varied reasons that students choose or may be required to transfer is an important element of an equitable, accessible, and diverse post-secondary sector.

While 72 percent of respondents transferred between universities, 30 percent transferred into university from a college which presents additional barriers. Despite learning outcomes being the same for college and university courses, many institutions do not view the courses as equivalent, which sets many college students back significantly. In addition, a number of programs are underrepresented amongst the transfer pathways available – such as public administration, agriculture, and art.[70] This is important when we remember that the vast majority of transfer students (87 percent) transfer into programs that are at least somewhat related to their former area of study.[71] In providing students with a diverse array of options when seeking higher education, institutions should reimagine their approach to transfer credits which would widely expand accessibility among post-secondary and give students the flexibility they deserve to pursue the education best suited for their personal and professional goals. There are some successful transfer pathways that can be used as a model for the development of transfer pathways. For example, engineering students have pointed to college-to-university transfer pathways at St. Mary's University, St. Francis Xavier University, and Lakehead University as successful transfer processes that could be replicated in the development of transfer pathways.[72] St. Mary's University, along with the others, offers a great deal of support to transfer students, partnering them with a recruitment agent to assess learning goals and offering flexible pathways depending on courses previously taken or one's grade point average from their previous institution.[73]

"I am looking to transfer my credits towards a different program. There is not a lot of information on this, and I am not sure how smooth the transition will be."

## STUDENT HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced students to reconsider their housing arrangements, and consequently, the rates of students living on- versus off-campus shifted compared to results from OUSA's previous surveys. Many of our respondents indicated that they were not looking for housing, justified by the widespread campus closures and shift to remote learning during the first several months of the pandemic. The push for off-campus housing may have also been driven by the lack of space for on-campus housing, where institutions reduced occupancy numbers in order to promote physical distancing as recommended by public health guidelines. However, it is important to note that the student housing market did not suffer tremendous loss during the pandemic, which has been attributed to students' desire for a traditional social experience at university.[74]

Next to COVID-19, cost was identified as the second highest reason for students' inability to secure housing. The cost of student-suitable housing has been steadily increasing over the past several years, creating an additional accessibility barrier for students in their pursuit of post-secondary education. In 2015, the average rent for a one-bedroom unit in municipalities where OUSA schools are situated was $845 increasing to $1,073 in 2020 - a 27 percent increase.[75]

Housing is one of several non-academic costs of post-secondary education on top of tuition and other living expenses. Cuts to OSAP in 2019 and limited employment opportunities arising from the pandemic

FIGURE 8: RENT OF ONE-BEDROOM UNIT IN MUNICIPALITIES OF OUSA MEMBER SCHOOLS, CAD $
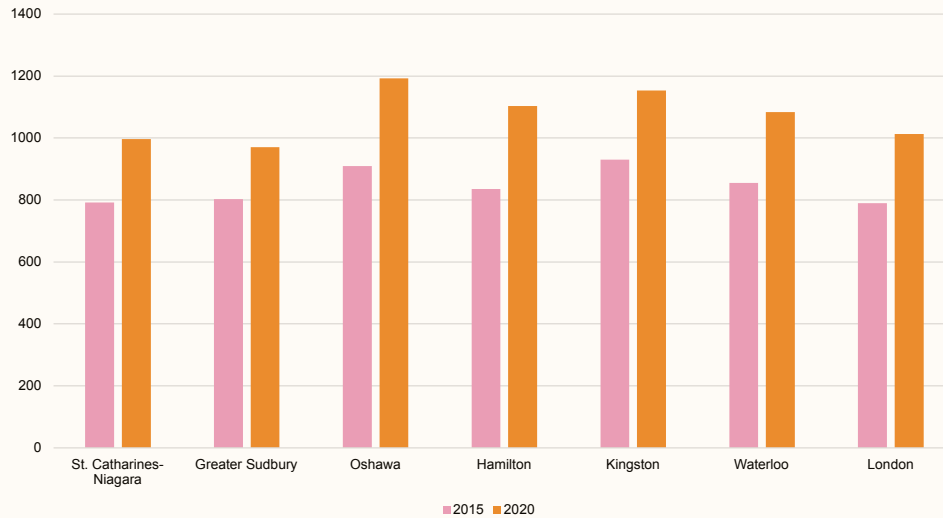
have placed a financial strain on students.[76] Thus, if the housing market continues to follow its upward trend, it will become an additional component of the post-secondary experience that is costly to students.

"Increased support for student housing and oversight for student housing. Student housing is a big problem in Waterloo: there is not enough housing supply, the quality is very poor, and landlords take advantage of students."

Coupled with constant high demand, housing accessibility is a challenge for students in their post-secondary experience. The fluidity of changes to COVID-19 guidelines that influence teaching plans has exacerbated this issue, as students receive last-minute direction that leaves them scrambling to secure adequate quality and affordable housing. Students have previously expressed concerns about how landlords and other private market corporations may take advantage of students' desperation by implementing price hikes or neglecting the quality of units.[77] For the Winter 2022 semester, students at the University of Waterloo expressed concern over renters up charging their units for potential subletters to make a profit. Given that many respondents in our survey are unaware of their rights and responsibilities under the *Residential Tenancies Act*, students are at risk of being manipulated into signing leases that act as a disservice to them. Therefore, OUSA recommends the provincial government should work with the Association of Municipalities of

Ontario to establish an advisory committee on student housing issues to identify concerns and develop solutions to issues related to quality and affordability.

Transportation issues act as a substantial access barrier. Typically, the cost of a bus pass for an institution's local public transit system is included with tuition as an ancillary fee, but the ability to opt in or out of paying this fee varies among schools. Public transit systems in several Ontario regions have faced cuts, reducing the routes available to students to commute to and from campus, as well as around the municipality. For example, five bus routes were cut by London Transit in December of 2021, removing some weekday service to Western University and consequently causing delays in transit as well as raising concerns about crowding on vehicles amidst the pandemic.[78]

Transit needs go beyond local municipal services. Students who commute longer distances or live outside the area their institution is situated in require access to efficient regional transit services. A 2019 study by StudentMoveTO found that the average commute time for a post-secondary student in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) is 45.9 minutes, with 41 percent reporting that their commute prevented them from going to campus.[79] The elimination of transit options extends to regional services as well, as exemplified by the termination of Greyhound's Canada-wide operations in the spring of 2021.[80] Transit is evidently a large determinant of accessibility to post-secondary education, and OUSA recommends that environmentally sustainable, long-term, inter-regional plans are developed that take into account post-secondary institutions.

CONCLUSION

Accessibility within post-secondary has long been an issue for students at OUSA member schools. Our results illustrate the varied barriers first-generation, international, Two-Spirt and LGBTQ+, racialized, mature and disabled students encounter throughout their time in university. Regardless of a student's identity or background there should be no impediments to their ability to access post-secondary education in Ontario. In providing all students with a fruitful and successful post-secondary journey, the provincial government and post-secondary institutions must take every reasonable step to create an accessible environment for all students.

OUSA believes that all willing and qualified students should have access to high quality education, and that accessibility should never be a barrier to post-secondary education. The benefits of post-secondary education are well-documented, including the relationship between a university degree and access to the labour market, earning potential, and economic mobility. However, these results confirm what we already know – the post-secondary landscape is not a level playing field and students who are low-income, first-generation, disabled, and/or racialized face disproportionate barriers. In improving the access to, and experience in, post-secondary for these students OUSA has outlined several recommendations in this report that can reduce the barriers students face while in post-secondary.

Data collected through the OUSS is an important tool to support OUSA's advocacy, both by confirming what students have shared with us anecdotally through consultations and by providing an opportunity to hear from a larger pool of students, and ultimately providing a more complete understanding of student concerns and experiences. This data is crucial to informing the evidence-based, student-driven recommendations for the provincial government and sector stakeholders, and we hope that our partners in the higher education sector will also find this data helpful to further their advocacy and policy development.

This report is the second in a series of three reports that look at the affordability, accessibility, and quality of post-secondary education. This report provided the results of our 2020 survey on questions of accessibility, illustrating the experiences of different marginalized groups. Together, this report series paints a more comprehensive picture of Ontario undergraduate student experiences in the fall of 2020. We know that questions of affordability, accessibility, and quality overlap significantly and we therefore encourage you to explore all reports to better understand what students are concerned about and how provincial, institutional, and sector leaders can best respond to their needs.

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