

## PUBLIC OPINION ON TUITION, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT, AND EFFORTS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN ONTARIO

### INTRODUCTION

Based on recent polling commissioned by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, an overwhelming majority of Ontarians (69.3%) believe that the current practice of increasing postsecondary tuition fees by five percent annually is unfair. When prompted to evaluate different policy alternatives, 59.6 percent agreed that the government should freeze tuition, while 70.8 percent agreed that all future increases should be tied to inflation. OUSA believes that this data indicates that a change to Ontario's current tuition framework to either a lower increase or a freeze would be strongly supported by the public.

Students were also encouraged by Ontario's willingness to support new efforts to combat youth unemployment. 74.4 percent of voting-age Ontarians indicated that they would support a new investment of \$100 million new dollars to combat youth unemployment, even when asked to keep in mind Ontario's current deficit.

Finally, respondents were asked pick between several different strategies to help support students living with mental illness at Ontario universities and colleges. The most supported strategies were increasing the number of mental health counsellors and running workshops to help students self-manage their symptoms.

### PROJECT OVERVIEW & METHODOLOGY

In anticipation of the 2013 Ontario Budget, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance has partnered with Nanos Research to conduct a series of public opinion polls to evaluate public opinion on post-secondary affordability, youth employment and efforts to support students with mental illness.

A random telephone survey of 500 Ontarians aged 18 and over was conducted between March 13<sup>th</sup> and March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The statistics of a random sample of 500 respondents are accurate to within 4.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The sample is made to be representative of Ontario's gender balance and age range.

#### About OUSA

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a non-partisan advocacy organization representing the interests of over 155,000 full and part-time undergraduate students at nine student organizations across Ontario.

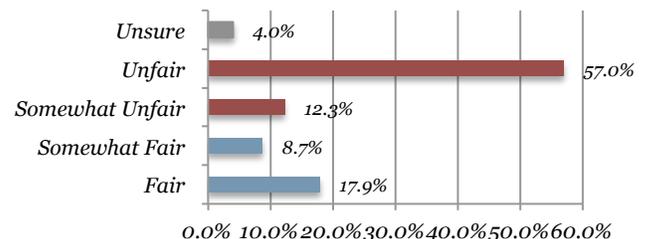
### EVALUATING PUBLIC OPINION OF ONTARIO TUITION POLICY

#### The Fairness of Ontario's Current Regulations

The first question asked of respondents was intended to capture overall public sentiment towards Ontario's current tuition regulations, which allow tuition to increase by an average of five percent annually. The question was phrased as follows:

*Do you believe it is fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair or unfair for the government to increase post-secondary tuition fees by five percent annually?*

**PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS IN ONTARIO'S CURRENT TUITION FEE REGULATIONS**



An overwhelming majority of 69.3 percent believed the current regime of 5 per cent increases was unfair. This belief varied slightly across age demographics, but a majority of Ontarians in all age ranges included in the poll responded to this question with either an "unfair" or "somewhat unfair" response, including those aged 60+.

**FAIRNESS OF CURRENT TUITION FRAMEWORK BY RESPONDENT AGE RANGE**

Age Range	Unfair or Somewhat Unfair	Fair or Somewhat Fair	Unsure
18-29	82.6%	8.6%	8.7%
30-39	80.3%	17.9%	1.8%
40-49	70.6%	29.3%	0.0%
50-59	66.1%	33.1%	0.8%
60 Plus	50.5%	41.8%	7.7%

With the knowledge that Ontario's current tuition framework is widely perceived to be unfair, OUSA then turned to the question of what Ontarians would prefer in it's stead.

## Measuring Support for Alternative Tuition Policies

For the past year, OUSA has been advocating for an end to the current set of tuition regulations with a tuition fee freeze of at least one year, with any future tuition increase tied to the rate of inflation. While this is the preferred short-term policy solution to students, OUSA believed it would be prudent to evaluate public opinion on both a tuition freeze and an increase tied to the rate of inflation.

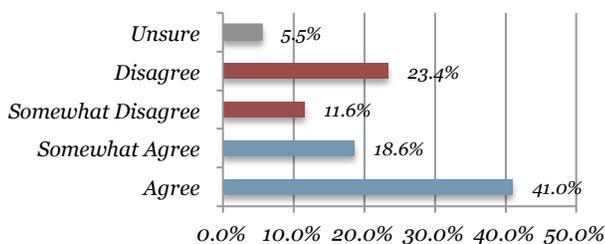
Respondents were asked the following multi-part question:

*Do you agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or disagree with the following statements:*

- *The Ontario government should freeze tuition fees for students and increase government funding to universities, even as Ontario struggles to address a deficit.*
- *The Ontario government should end the practice of increasing tuition fees by five percent annually and tie all future increases to inflation.*

When prompting respondents about their support for a tuition freeze, OUSA wanted to ensure that respondents had full context for what a tuition freeze would actually entail in terms of government action. In practice, tuition freezes actually must be accompanied by increases in the amount of government funding available to universities, to help cover rising institutional costs and off-set the lost tuition revenue. Due to the fact that this increased investment would need to be made at a time when the Ontario government is looking to scale back costs in all public sectors, OUSA thought it would also be wise to remind respondents of this reality.

### AGREEMENT WITH A TUITION FREEZE ACCOMPANIED BY AN INCREASE IN GOVERNMENT FUNDING TO UNIVERSITIES

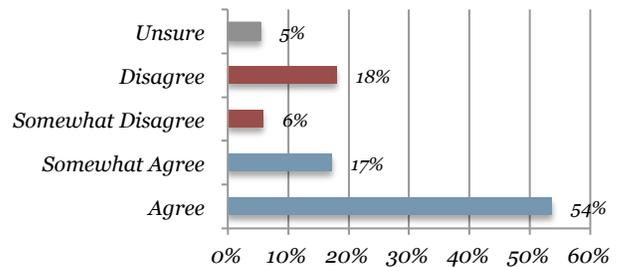


As can be plainly seen, even when respondents prompted with a reminder of the provincial deficit and informed that a tuition freeze would imply increased government funding, 59.7 percent Ontarians agreed that tuition should be frozen. It is worth noting that the level of support for a tuition freeze would likely be higher if the aforementioned prompts were not put in place. Overall levels of support for a tuition freeze were similar between all age groups, with the exception of those aged 60 plus, who were less likely to agree with the given statement. 51 percent of respondents over the age of 60 agreed that tuition should be frozen, as opposed to 50 percent for all other age groups.

Ontarians of all ages were overwhelmingly in support of replacing the current tuition framework with a lower increase tied to inflation. Overall, 70.8 percent of Ontarians agreed that the government of Ontario should end the practice of

increasing university tuition fees by five percent annually and tie all future increases to inflation.

### AGREEMENT WITH A TUITION INCREASE TIED TO INFLATION



The question was structured in order to emphasize how an inflationary increase relates to current policy; namely that the tuition increase would be lower. Due to widespread public unhappiness with rising tuition in general, OUSA wanted this question to measure how the public would react to progress towards a lower rate of increase, rather than the notion of rising tuition itself.

The result was overwhelming support for a lower rate of tuition increase tied to inflation. While it is likely that tuition increases tied to inflation would still meet with some public opposition, these results indicate that most Ontarians would agree that such a policy change would represent progress in the right direction.

### LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR NEW RESOURCES TO COMBAT YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth Unemployment in Canada is nearly double the general rate of unemployment, currently sitting at 14 percent.<sup>1</sup> With all three of Ontario's major political parties currently discussing strategies to help tackle youth unemployment, any new investments in employment initiatives will come at a time when Ontario looks to trim a financial deficit. OUSA's public opinion poll on this question is intended to measure support for a new investment in support for youth employment, even as other areas of the provincial government experience cutbacks.

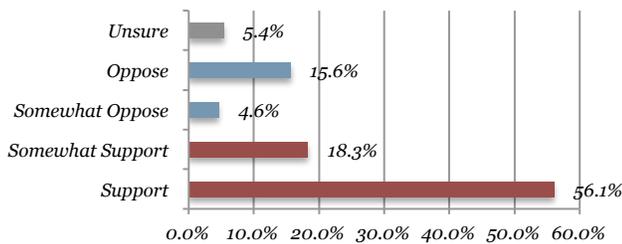
Respondents were asked the following question:

*Keeping in mind Ontario's current deficit, would you support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or oppose the government investing \$100 million dollars in new resources to help combat youth unemployment?*

Despite being prompted about Ontario's deficit, the vast majority of Ontarians indicated that they would support the investment new resources to help address youth unemployment. Nearly three-quarters (74.4 percent) of respondents answered that they would support or somewhat support this sort of investment, while only 20.2 percent of respondents opposed. OUSA believes that all three political parties should take this as an indication that new initiatives to help address youth unemployment would be received well by the voting public.

<sup>1</sup> Schwerdtfeger. (2013). *Assessing the Long Term Cost of Youth Unemployment*. Toronto: TD Economics. Accessed: [http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/mso113\\_YouthUnemp.pdf](http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/mso113_YouthUnemp.pdf)

### SUPPORT FOR \$100 MILLION IN NEW INVESTMENT IN INITIATIVES TO COMBAT YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT



### DIFFERENT STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Supporting students living with mental illness of any kind has been a top priority of OUSA for the past year. The Ontario government has already taken some significant steps to address the issue of campus mental health, but more must be done. In order to help evaluate different strategies, OUSA included in its poll a question prompting respondents to pick a preferred approach.

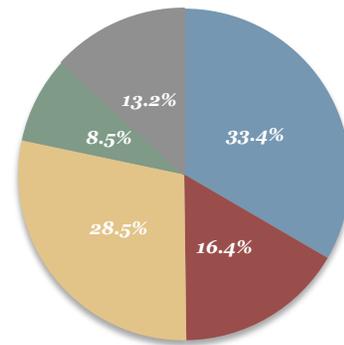
Respondents were asked the following question:

*If the province were to increase funding for mental health support services at universities and colleges, which ONE of the following activities do you believe should be a priority for provincial government funding?*

- *Increasing the number of mental health counsellors to reduce wait times;*
- *An online network of mental health practitioners and students that could share best-practices and knowledge between post-secondary institutions;*
- *Workshops that help equip students with the skills to self-manage their mental health symptoms as they arise, in lieu of seeing a counselor;*
- *Advocacy campaigns offered on campus that aim to reduce the degree of stigma associated with mental health crises among university students;*
- *Unsure.*

No individual response achieved a majority of respondents, though levels of support varied widely between each strategy. The most popular response was increasing the number of mental health counsellors to reduce on-campus wait times, with 33 percent responses. However, investing in the creation of workshops that could equip students with coping strategies was also a popular response, polling within the margin of error with investments in frontline care. It is also worth noting the relatively low level of support (8.5 percent) for advocacy campaigns to help reduce stigma. The reasons for this are unclear, but Ontarians seem to prefer strategies that involve direct contact between experts and counsellors and students living with mental illness to more indirect approaches, like online networks or advocacy campaigns.

### ONTARIO'S PREFERRED APPROACH TO SUPPORTING STUDENTS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



- *Increasing the number of mental health counsellors to reduce wait times;*
- *An online network of mental health practitioners and students that could share best-practices and knowledge between postsecondary institutions;*
- *Workshops that help equip students with the skills to self-manage their mental health symptoms as they arise, in lieu of seeing a counsellor;*
- *Advocacy campaigns that aim to reduce the degree of stigma associated with mental health crises among university students;*
- *Unsure.*

OUSA believes that these results support both the need for the province to invest in frontline care and innovative new strategies to ensure at-risk students are connecting with the help they need.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information about this survey, the results, or any of the topics discussed, please contact:

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