



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 140,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

POLICY BRIEF: STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

Students' understanding and participation in "work" affects their university experience in many ways. Employment can serve as both a motivator and hindrance to academic success. It can teach valuable lessons while also detracting from academic work. It is the number one reason why students attend post-secondary school. Unfortunately, numerous barriers stand in the way of increasing the employment rates of highly educated youth. These barriers must be treated as distinct yet interconnected, and necessitate multifaceted approaches. This OUSA policy paper outlines how government, employers, educators, and students can work together to overcome barriers and move towards a more prosperous, productive future.

THE PROBLEM

Difficult Paths to Employment

The transition from school to work is becoming increasingly difficult for Ontario's youth. According to Statistics Canada, unemployment rates remain erratic and above the national average for highly educated youth, sitting at 8.7 percent for bachelor's degree holders in 2015. At the same time, by 2036, 23.1 percent of the population is expected to be 65 years or older. Attrition rates are low because of an aging population and poor economic climate, limiting the employment and training opportunities for new entrants to the labour market. Students are expected to take a linear path from secondary school, through post-secondary education, to their chosen career-track job—an expectation known as the "career myth." Little room is left for them to develop interdisciplinary, personal, and professional identities that would help them excel in uncertain economic times.

Dissociated Learning Outcomes

The separation of in-class learning outcomes and skill development makes it difficult for students to describe their proficiencies to employers. Outside of the classroom, students are not provided with adequate information on employment opportunities and they are expected to access and fund career-related resources independently. Government and employers do not share the same understanding of labour market needs and trends, which makes it all the more difficult to convey this information to students and recent graduates.

Limited Experience

Employers look for related job experience in entry-level hires. Unfortunately, academic demands make it difficult for students to engage in meaningful employment experiences while in study. As a result, a limited number of students work in positions related to their field of study while in university. The discrimination experienced by marginalized populations can make it especially difficult for some students to find jobs.

Unsatisfactory Conditions

There is a higher demand for co-op opportunities than there are jobs and placements available. This means many students do not have access to high-quality opportunities—particularly those in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. This puts young workers in desperate and vulnerable situations. The *Employment Standards Act (ESA)* does not cover individuals participating in work-experience programs for school and students are disproportionately involved in unpaid work. Students worry that, employers are able to exploit young workers with limited consequences.

Little On-the-Job Training

Recent graduates do not always have the technical skills that employers expect them to, yet employers do not provide their employees with substantial on-the-job training. Government subsidies have changed this in the past, however not all incentives are equally effective for small, medium, and large businesses.

Forgotten Entrepreneurs

Not enough students have the opportunity or resources to explore entrepreneurship during their university career. Although the government acknowledges the need to innovate, Ontario has demonstrated persistently weak performance and economic growth in this regard. When students are able to participate in entrepreneurial initiatives, their intellectual property is not always adequately protected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve Transitions

Highly educated students are critical to the success of Ontario's workforce and the government must work to decrease their unemployment rates. To do this, the provincial government should:

- Set a target to reach full employment among new graduates,

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

- Define different contributors' roles in the *Youth Employment Strategy*, and
- Initiate a cross-sector review of existing youth employment programs and release the results.

All students should have access to a wide breadth of learning opportunities that encourage them to explore multiple career and learning paths. The post-secondary sector could work to dispel the career myth by:

- Ensuring students are exposed to realistic messages about their employment outcomes,
- Adapting secondary school curriculum to include thorough career and guidance counselling,
- Providing students with job shadowing and mentorship opportunities, and
- Requiring students to take classes outside their major.

Compile Information & Expand Programming

All undergraduate students should have access to resources that increase their understanding of how and where to get a job. Students should be encouraged to develop and attain skills that provide personal fulfillment and satisfaction, while also being taught to articulate these skills. Universities could improve students' employability if they:

- Presented and articulated learning outcomes in course outlines,
- Ensured transferable and technical skills are associated with learning outcomes,
- Made all students aware of career services upon enrolment, and
- Designated additional funding to career services.

Students need reliable and easy to access labour market information. The provincial government should work with universities and employers to:

- Understand emerging labour market trends and convey this information to students,
- Provide detailed and nuanced data on graduate employment outcomes, and
- Provide envelope funding for career services at universities.

Increase In-Study Employment

All students should have equal access to, and equally benefit from, in-study employment opportunities in their field of study. The provincial government should:

- Provide wage subsidies to employers who hire students part-time,
- Facilitate relationships between the private sector and universities to match students to relevant opportunities,
- Invest in and incentivize programs targeted at those with higher rates of unemployment, and
- Legislate that employers decouple names from applications.

Expand Experiential Learning

All willing and qualified students should be able to benefit from experiential learning opportunities while they attend

university. Diverse forms of experiential learning should be made available to compliment various disciplines and meet student demand. Any experiences should be of high enough quality to increase students' employment prospects. The provincial government could support universities in these endeavours by:

- Providing financial incentives to universities to ensure experiential learning is available to all students,
- Encouraging the development of alternatives to co-op,
- Creating grants that incentivize employers to hire co-op students and interns, and
- Working with interested universities to expand their co-op and internship programs in fields with low participation rates.

Students who engage in work experience programs should have the same protections as other Ontario workers. It is unfair to expect students to work without pay or ESA protection in order to meet degree requirements. The province could better protect students at work by:

- Amending the ESA to include students engaged in work experience programs;
- Using employment blitzes to enforce ESA compliance and prevent abuses;
- Banning employers, universities, and accreditation bodies from requiring or supporting unpaid internships; and
- Developing a grant program to help low-earning businesses pay their interns.

Encourage Employer Training

Employers are in the best position to provide technical training. They should be incentivized to reclaim their responsibility to train employees using a wide variety of incentives. The province should:

- Reallocate current youth-employment-related tax credits for small and medium sized businesses towards upfront grants and wage subsidies, and
- Create wage subsidies and grants to enable not-for-profit businesses to hire recent graduates.

Stimulate Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial initiatives provide students with transferable skills that they do not receive in the classroom and are key components in increasing Ontario's economic growth, prosperity, and productivity. All willing and qualified students should have the opportunity to participate. Entrepreneurship could be introduced to more students if the provincial government:

- Created new initiatives to support students,
- Encouraged universities to recognize the role of entrepreneurship in post-secondary environments,
- Prioritized increasing entrepreneurial activity at universities,
- Conducted research on new and existing programs,
- Regulated intellectual property management standards to protect student researchers and incubator residents, and
- Created incentives for universities and employers to increase entrepreneurial activity.