



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

ACCOUNTABILITY

INTRODUCTION

The question of how to hold Ontario's universities accountable to the needs of students is a relatively complex one. One must be careful to balance the need for academic freedom with the public's (and especially students') right to be assured that its considerable investments into postsecondary institutions are being used effectively and appropriately. OUSA's Accountability paper offers recommendations to improve quality assurance and strategic goal-setting in Ontario's universities. In essence, it describes students' vision of to whom, for what, and how universities should be held accountable.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Governance

Students are not adequately represented on university boards of governors or senates. Given students' obvious stake in the quality and direction of their education, in addition to their considerable contributions to university funding, this is unacceptable. Student representation on such bodies is inconsistent and in Ontario can range from 16% to as low as 2.7%. Additionally, many boards are steadily growing without increasing student presence to keep proportion, and many boards fail to ensure proper participation of both graduate and undergraduate students. These patterns are true of board and senate committees as well, where many operational decisions are actually made.

Accountability Mechanisms

The primary accountability tool of the past several years has been the Multi-Year Accountability Agreement (MYAA). By filing these reports, universities earn a portion of their operating funds. However the content of these reports is insubstantial; universities are free to describe any progress they have made in very broad terms, and are rewarded for it as a matter of course. As a strategic tool, the MYAA is lacking.

Recently the provincial government and university administrations agreed on Strategic Mandate Agreements: descriptions of strengths, goals, and metrics of success at each institution. These, being more goal-oriented and more detailed on a wider range of topics, are much better-suited to strategic planning than the MYAAs. However, they still lack specific targets. More importantly, they are not yet tied to funding levers and incentives, without which they will not be able to affect change.

Targeted Funding

The majority of university funding is unrestricted, which means that it can be managed and spent towards the operations of a university in any way its administration chooses. However, one of the best ways to promote certain

priorities or behaviours in university spending is for the government to earmark certain funds as envelopes that must be spent on certain projects or goals. Currently, there is little reporting and even less public awareness of how closely universities adhere to these restrictions, and how effective these envelopes are at achieving the desired outcomes.

One of the chief funding envelopes, "performance funding," is deeply flawed. It fails to offer sufficient funds to act as a true incentive, nor does it focus on the right criteria of performance. Performance funding is based on Key Performance Indicators (which are graduation rates, aggregate employment outcomes, and loan default rates) that give imperfect and incomplete information regarding a university's success.

Ombudsman Office

Most universities lack a local ombudsman office. These offices house impartial experts that can offer students advice and investigate shortcomings and legal noncompliance in university operations. Additionally, at the time of writing, the Province has not yet extended jurisdiction over the university sector to the Ontario Ombudsman office, which has been extremely valuable and effective in other sectors.

Quality Assurance

Though programs, courses, and learning outcomes are currently designed according to a quality assurance process, this process has several inadequacies that can be improved. At the top level, learning outcomes are based on Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UDLEs), which establish what a graduate ought to know at the end of their studies. However the UDLEs are extremely ambiguous and do not lend themselves well to measurement. Additionally, internal evaluation criteria, which are used to judge the worthiness of new or current programs, are similarly vague.

One area of quality control is being badly under-leveraged: student evaluations of teachers (SETs). These evaluations gather different information from institution-to-institution, and it is not clear how or if the feedback is used. SETs are a potentially rich source of quality information that is not being exploited.

Data Collection

Lastly, the province is currently operating in a dearth of system-wide and longitudinal data regarding student mobility, student success and by extension, university effectiveness. The data that does exist is extremely general and does not allow for nuanced analysis. Without the ability to observe the ease and effectiveness of pathways in Ontario's postsecondary system and employment outcomes of recent grads.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OUSA recommends that the following strategies be adopted to ensure that universities can be held accountable to deliver high quality student experiences.

Governance

- The provincial government should appoint Board members knowledgeable in PSE-sector issues
- The selection process for student representatives must reflect student association selection processes
- Strategic plans, such as the SMAs, should be reviewed by governing bodies on which students are represented
- The Province should mandate that a minimum of 13% of seats on Boards of Governors and 25% of seats on Senates be reserved for undergraduates
- There should be opportunity for student presence on every committee of university governing boards
- Membership totals of Boards and student representation should be transparent, visible, and available
- University bylaws should be amended to guarantee student membership on Boards
- University Boards should be flexible enough to accommodate student schedules
- In-camera sessions must include student input
- Students coming to a Board for disciplinary purposes should have the ability to request a replacement for any member of the body

Accountability Mechanisms

- The government should redirect MYAA financial incentives to compliance with the new SMAs
- The government should use funding levers to encourage universities to meet strategic goals
- Evaluations of progress towards strategic goals should account for both outcomes and methods
- Strategic planning must include wide-ranging student consultation
- The government and institutions should set long-term enrolment targets
- The government and institutions should set targets for initiatives that remove access barriers for underrepresented populations
- The government should mandate a certain percentage of small classes for students
- The government should mandate universities to develop faculty hiring plans that address growing teaching demand and average teaching loads

- Universities should report on all student services and the extent to which these services are funded by compulsory student fees
- Universities should report all compulsory ancillary fees collected from students

Targeted Funding

- Universities should provide detailed reports on envelope funding
- The government should publish an annual analysis of sector progress towards the goals of all funding envelopes
- The government should redirect performance funding to SMA-progress funding

Ombudsman Office

- The government should fund ombudsman offices at every university, operated at arms length
- The Ontario Ombudsman should have jurisdiction over the university sector

Quality Assurance

- Quality assurance practices should adopt the Lumina degree profile in lieu of the UDLEs
- There should be an internal check for programs to be added or changed
- New programs should be evaluated within three years, before proceeding to the eight year review cycle
- SETs should be both formative and summative, and contribute to an instructor's merit considerations for promotion and tenure
- Funding for, and the activities of, teaching and learning centres should increase, and should incorporate SET feedback
- SETs should be published and heeded when developing faculty skills and professional development plans
- Quality frameworks should be representative of underrepresented groups

Data Collection

- The Ontario Education Number should be used to collect data, which should be made anonymous to protect privacy
- The government should publicize statistically significant results of the Post-Graduate Survey