



Behind the doors of the University of Toronto's Simcoe Hall, the school's governing council voted in favour of passing a controversial policy that would mandate students who are experiencing a mental health crisis to take a leave of absence. The policy drew criticism from students who said it neglects to include the voice of those who are living with a mental health issue.

"The policy is literally not what they're saying, it's just a vague piece of paper," Felipe Nagata, president of the University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union, explained.

"That's upsetting and frustrating."

U of T students implored committee members to delay the vote on the 'university-mandated leave of absence,' calling on the administration to address concerns expressed by them.

The policy, according to the school, provides students who are experiencing a mental health crisis the option to take a voluntary or mandatory leave of absence, or remain enrolled while exploring which services can address their mental health needs.

However, students argue that this policy has harmful gaps that doesn't consider the experiences of all students. There are also concerns the administration is abandoning solutions in favour of this policy.

“This policy currently as it is doesn’t acknowledge the lived experiences of racialized and Indigenous students, of part-time students, of international students,” said Nour Alideeb, from the Canadian Federation of Students Ontario.

“So there are a number of things the students have been asking to do to improve the policy.”

Student organizations from other schools came together for a rally at U of T on Wednesday evening as the ‘university-mandated leave of absence’ was being discussed and voted on.

Joshua Grondin was one of six speakers addressing the committee, urging them to delay the policy and make revisions. He just graduated this year but told CityNews, as someone who has experienced a mental health crisis, a policy like this would do more harm than good.

“I’m concerned the policy will sort of prevent students from coming forward with mental health issues,” Grondin explained. “I think there’s going to be this fear that they would be subjected to this policy.”

Earlier this year, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) sent an open letter to the university saying, among other things, that this policy may result in discretion.

The university told CityNews it’s made modifications to the policy since then and is confident that it is in compliance with the OHRC.

The OHRC wasn’t available to provide a comment on the passing of the policy, but said it would be closely monitoring how it is implemented.

The policy was introduced in response to recommendations put forward by the school’s ombudsman back in 2014, and it has spent 18 months consulting the community.

The policy is intended to be used in extreme circumstances, with the administration adding it expects to apply it between three to five times a year.

“It is designed to give the university a way to respond, that is not punitive, to [a] concerning behaviour that is believed to be a result of serious mental health or other issues,” Sandy Welsh, vice-provost of students, said in an email statement.

“It is to be applied in rare cases. It is always preferable to pursue other options where reasonably feasible.”

During the discussions, a motion was introduced to delay voting on the policy for further consultations until the fall.

However, the majority of voting members were against it.

The administration told members, which consisted of a few students, that if they did not vote on the policy now, it would be gone forever and the university would be left with the current policy to deal with this issue.

Currently, mental health issues are dealt with in accordance with the the code of student

conduct, a process described as disciplinary and punitive.

The administration said it didn't want to delay the vote because there are "fundamental differences that can't be addressed in further consultations."

The policy, according to Welsh, will give administrators the opportunity to survey what resources and services are available to students who are going through a "serious episode involving a mental health or other similar issue."

The policy will be enacted when the school is presented with evidence of the student's behaviour, and concerns about their safety and well-being. On the U of T website, Welsh explained that she and a team consisting of a case manager and support team would review the report, which may also involve a medical professional conducting an assessment if a student is mandated to take a leave of absence.

If the student disagrees, they can request a review and file an appeal with the university tribunal.

"A key driver for the policy is our desire to formalize a layer of review of the support for students who have serious mental health or related issues that are preventing them from safely or productively continuing their studies," Welsh said.

"This ability to put in place accommodations and supports is prevalent throughout the policy, and a review of accommodations and supports is the first step under the policy. The policy also provides for a voluntary leave option."

Each student will be dealt with on a case-by-case bases and it's the university that will decide how long the leave is, how the school year will affect a student on leave and their tuition, and if the student on a leave of absence can continue to use university facilities.

U of T's ombudsman also made an appearance at Wednesday's meeting, telling members of the administration she is aware of the concerns expressed by students and assured attendees and voters she would be involved in the annual review of the policy, as well as its evaluation in three years.

Members of the administration also promised to work closely with student groups to ensure everyone's voices and concerns are included.

"I'd want to continue working with the administration to make sure that it is being used properly and that students understand what rights they have in these situations," Grondin explained.

"Obviously there's a need for more mental health resources on campus to avoid these problems in the first place. I think these are problems we can address simultaneously."