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What are Ontario's Universities Doing to Improve Access for Under-represented Groups?

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Executive Summary

Previous research has found that Aboriginal students, first-generation students (that is, those who are the first in their families to attend postsecondary education), students with disabilities, those from rural areas, and those who have a low family income are underrepresented in Ontario's universities (Finnie, Childs & Wismer, 2011). The first three of these groups were also identified by Rae (2005), based on public consultations across Ontario and a review of available research, as priority groups whose participation in college and university should be increased.

What are Ontario's universities doing to improve access for under-represented groups? This study sought to answer that question through systematic analyses of the universities' websites, viewbooks for prospective applicants, the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) instruction booklet, the strategic mandate agreement (SMAs) between each university and Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), and semi-structured interviews with administrators from 16 of Ontario's 20 provincially supported universities. The focus was on first-entry programs (that is, programs such as bachelor's programs that do not require previous postsecondary education) at those universities.

When we asked the universities' registrars or their representatives what groups their university had identified as underrepresented and how the university had decided to focus on those groups, most referred to the three groups identified by Rae (2005), but also suggested that their decisions to focus on one or more of these groups (and, for some universities, on other groups as well) were shaped by their university's location, history and/or mission.

Seven of the universities listed serving specific under-represented groups among their "key areas of differentiation" (that is, the areas of strength that distinguish that university from others in Ontario) in the SMAs. All 20 universities mentioned first-generation students in the "Student Population" section of their SMAs, but only three did so in their viewbooks. In contrast, supports for Aboriginal students were featured prominently in both the SMAs and the viewbooks, in the latter case often with pictures of First Nations ceremonies and of rooms or buildings designed for the use of First Nations students. In the OUAC instruction booklet, fewer institutions provided information about access for Aboriginal students or first-generation students, but more provided information for students with disabilities. University websites provided information about and for more of the under-represented groups.

All of the universities described activities intended to improve access for under-represented groups. These included outreach programs, such as Laurier's Building Bridges to Success Program for students attending secondary schools in "socially and economically disadvantaged communities"; recruitment efforts, such as those associated with Lakehead's certificate, diploma and degree programs for Aboriginal students; access through admissions initiatives, such as Queen's alternative pathway to admission for Aboriginal students; and retention services, such as Carlton's facilities and supports for students with disabilities and Laurentian's peer mentoring program for first-generation students.

Although each university reported the number and proportion of Aboriginal students, first-generation students, students with disabilities and francophone students at their institutions, as required by their Multi-year Accountability Agreements with MTCU, there was little evidence of formal evaluations of the effects of these activities.

In considering the roles of these activities within universities, we identified three broad “types” of universities. All of Ontario’s universities do not fit neatly into these types – some are hybrids or variations – but the types capture what we believe are important patterns. The first type is universities that have high admission requirements; within Ontario, these tend to be universities with doctoral and medical programs. Initiatives to attract under-represented groups to these universities may tend to target those within the under-represented groups who are already embedded in a path to postsecondary education. The second type is universities that describe their campuses as small and physically safe and that emphasize that all students will receive ample support to succeed academically. These universities have lower admission requirements and have typically recruited students who are embedded on a path to postsecondary education. The third type includes universities that see their role as providing an opportunity for a university education for any student who is interested. These universities have flexible admissions processes and offer remedial courses and a wide range of academic supports. Interestingly, because these universities are committed to access, they are less likely to focus on specific initiatives for under-represented groups.

Our findings suggest that Ontario’s universities recognize the need to improve access to PSE for under-represented groups. Each university has one or more initiatives to improve access to PSE for under-represented groups. Nevertheless, there exist issues that complicate the provision of access. For instance, the intersectionality of under-represented groups and reliance on self-identification pose challenges for universities in providing equitable access and in being able to accurately evaluate the impact of access initiatives.

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1 Introduction

Studies of who attends university in Ontario (see, for example, Finnie, Childs & Wismer, 2011) have found that the population of university students does not represent the general population. Increasing access to postsecondary education (PSE) for under-represented groups was identified as a priority in Rae's (2005) report, titled *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*, to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU).

This study asks what Ontario's 20 provincially supported universities are doing to improve access for under-represented groups to first-entry programs (that is, programs that do not require previous PSE participation). We draw on the universities' websites, viewbooks,¹ the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) instruction booklet, the strategic mandate agreements (SMAs) between universities and TCU, and interviews with university administrators. This study is *not* an evaluation of universities' relevant activities. Rather, by providing a province-wide summary of the current responses by Ontario's universities to underrepresentation, we hope to inform the continued development of Ontario's PSE system and increased participation of under-represented groups.

This study considers three research questions, which together address the question posed in the title of this report: What are Ontario's universities doing to improve access for under-represented groups? The research questions are:

1. How have universities defined under-represented groups?
2. What university activities focus on improving access for students from under-represented groups?
3. How are universities measuring the impact of these activities?

1.1 What Do We Mean by "Under-represented Groups"?

A group is deemed to be underrepresented in PSE if the proportion of people participating in PSE who are members of the group is less than the proportion of the general population who are members of the group. For example, if a group represented 20% of the general population but represented only 10% of students who are attending first-entry programs at Ontario universities, that group would be considered underrepresented.

What is a group? In investigations of underrepresentation in PSE, groups have often been defined based on gender, race, ethnic origin, language or socioeconomic status. These aspects of identity have been used in the past to justify inequitable allocation of educational opportunities.² Also relevant to investigations of underrepresentation in Ontario's universities is the history of universities in Ontario, the historical and social

¹ Information booklets distributed to prospective applicants.

² Racial segregation of Ontario's elementary and secondary schools until the middle of the last century being but one example (see Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005, for a succinct history of racial discrimination in Ontario).

contexts in which they were created, who they were created by and for,³ and how they have distinguished and differentiated themselves from each other in the past and intend to in the future. Although a finding of underrepresentation in Ontario universities does not necessarily indicate discrimination, it does signal a need for investigation into the reasons and exploration of remedies.

Individuals with disabilities are sometimes considered to be a group, although the factors contributing to their underrepresentation in PSE vary widely by disability, from classrooms that are not wheelchair accessible to some faculty members' reluctance to accommodate different learning needs.

Aboriginal identity is also often a basis for grouping students in investigations of PSE underrepresentation. We believe it to be important not only to acknowledge this continued designation but also to elaborate upon the distinct rights of Aboriginal Peoples to PSE education. We discuss these rights in section 3 of this report.

1.2 Who is Underrepresented in Ontario's Universities?

In his 2005 report, Rae recommended that TCU focus on three groups of students when expanding opportunities for PSE: Aboriginal students, first-generation students (that is, students who are the "first in the family to participate in postsecondary education" (p. 12)⁴), and students with disabilities. A decade later, these groups have indeed become the focus of TCU's efforts to increase access to PSE. For example, each of the SMAs negotiated in the summer of 2014 between each of Ontario's universities and TCU included the following introduction to the section on "Student Population":

This component recognizes the unique institutional missions that improve access, retention, and success for under-represented groups (Aboriginal, first-generation, students with disabilities) and francophones. This component also highlights other important student groups that institutions serve that link to their institutional strength. This may include, but is not limited to, international students, mature students, or indirect entrants.

In addition to the groups cited by TCU, analyses of PSE participation in Ontario have identified other under-represented groups. For example, Finnie, Childs and Wismer (2011) investigated university attendance at age 22 of about 2,400 Ontario youth who had participated in the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) at age 15. They found that the following characteristics negatively predicted university attendance (in order of decreasing weight): not having parents who had attended PSE, having a disability, identifying as Aboriginal, being from a rural area and having a family income below \$50,000. Children of immigrants had a greater likelihood of attending university than children of non-immigrants.

³ For example, Ontario's oldest universities were initially closed to women. For example, see Burke (1999) for a vivid account of the controversies surrounding the University of Toronto's admittance of women in 1884, 57 years after it was founded as King's College.

⁴ TCU has since defined first-generation students variously as "students from families that have no history of university or college education" (TCU, 2007a) and as "those students whose parents did not participate in postsecondary studies" (TCU, 2007b).

Norrie and Zhao (2011) drew on data from the YITS and the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID), as well as data from OUAC and a study conducted for Colleges Ontario to conclude that “having any of the following characteristics lowers the chance that an Ontario youth will enroll in PSE: being from a low income family, having parents with no PSE, living in a rural area, identifying as Aboriginal, and having a disability” (p. 32). Not only did their analysis show that each of these characteristics make PSE attendance less likely, but that each characteristic contributes uniquely, so that youth with more than one characteristic have especially low enrolment rates.

The data analyzed by Finnie et al. (2011) and by Norrie and Zhao (2011) did not include information about race beyond Aboriginal identity. However, research by the Toronto District School Board (2012), which includes almost one-sixth of the elementary and secondary students in Ontario, shows that some groups of the TDSB's racialized students are underrepresented in PSE. In its longitudinal study of students who were in grade 9 in 2006, the TDSB calculated the percentages of students who had graduated from high school five years later and found that “students who identified themselves as Black, Latin [American], Mixed, or Middle Eastern have lower graduation rates (64.5%, 69.9%, 73%, and 77.5% respectively)” than students who “identified themselves as East Asian, South Asian, South East Asian, and White (91.2%, 87%, 84.1%, and 81.9% respectively)” (p. 3). Self-identified Latin American and Black students had the lowest rates of confirmed admissions to PSE: 38.7% and 41.4%, respectively. This is echoed in the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009), which shows that Black youth have the lowest rate of PSE participation in Canada. These studies provide strong justification for considering these racialized minorities as under-represented groups.

There are intersections among groups. For example, having historically been prevented by the government from attending PSE, most Aboriginal persons are also first-generation. Rae (2005) acknowledged this and other intersections when he wrote:

First-generation children represent a large portion of high school entrants who do not go on to postsecondary studies. They represent many of the traditionally under-represented groups that are a focus in this report: low-income Ontarians, Aboriginal peoples and many racial minorities. (p. 67)

Students from under-represented groups may also take longer to begin and complete PSE, making them more likely to enrol as mature students.

1.3 Defining Terms: ‘Outreach,’ ‘Recruitment,’ ‘Access through Admissions’ and ‘Retention’

In discussing efforts to decrease underrepresentation in PSE, we found it helpful to distinguish among four terms. In this study:

‘Outreach’ refers to efforts intended to increase awareness about the option of PSE for school-aged children and youth (emphasizing the accessibility and importance of postsecondary education),

without the intentions of immediate application to and/or enrolment in any specific university. Outreach often happens early, starting in elementary or middle school. Outreach programs can be especially important for students who may not assume that PSE is an option for them or who may not have a family member who can advise them on what courses they would need to take in secondary school to be prepared for PSE.

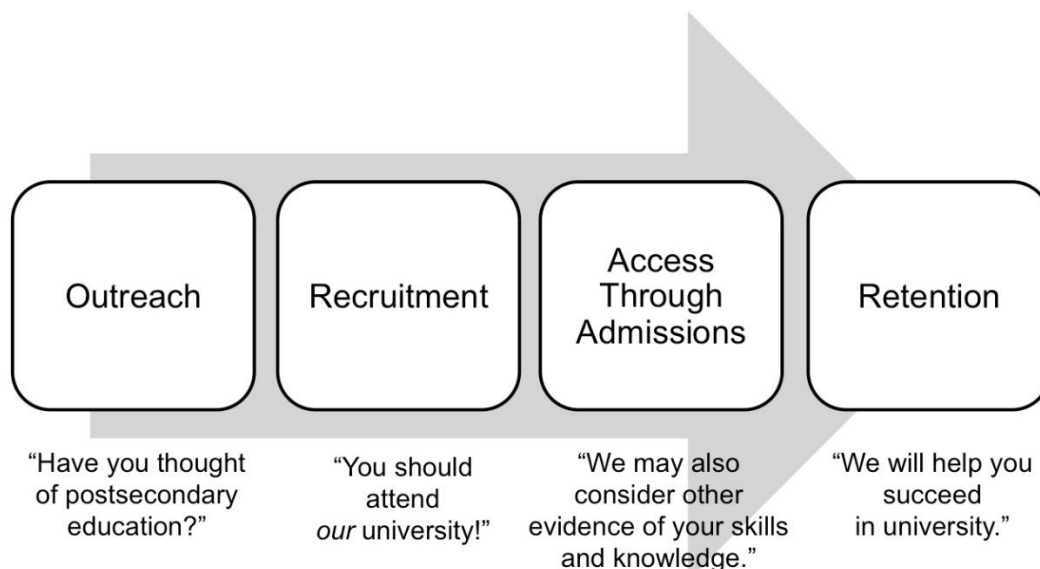
'Recruitment' refers to efforts to persuade potential applications to apply to and attend a particular university and/or specific academic programs within that university. This might include promotional and other marketing initiatives.

'Access through admissions' refers to support offered to prospective students as they move through the university admission process, or to alternative ways students from under-represented groups may demonstrate their readiness for and application to university-level study.

'Retention' refers to attempts to keep students enrolled in university study through the availability of services and/or programs such as funding, tutoring or mentoring.

Figure 1 summarizes how these terms are used in this study.

Figure 1: Types of University Initiatives



2 The Problem of Underrepresentation

2.1 Factors and Barriers

Understanding the reasons for underrepresentation is an important first step to more equitable access. Models of PSE attendance have typically included one or a combination of the following factors: social capital, cultural capital and economics. Based on analyses of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study in the US, Perna (2007) has argued that all three are important but may have different weights for different groups of applicants.⁵

Related to these factors are barriers to equal representation. In an analysis of state and federal government initiatives designed to increase access to PSE in the US, Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Thomas and Li (2008) identified three barriers that the initiatives were designed to address: academic preparation, knowledge about PSE and financial resources. They found that the majority of government initiatives focused on the third barrier: financial resources. Osborne (2003) notes a similar focus on financial resources in some European countries. Consistent with this focus, Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities identifies one of its priorities as to "improve access to postsecondary education through a strong student financial assistance program" (TCU, 2014, p. 7). In addition to government agencies, some PSE institutions also address financial barriers.

The other barriers identified by Perna et al. (2008) – academic preparation and knowledge about PSE – are addressed by some PSE institutions, sometimes in collaboration with local elementary and secondary schools. There is a growing body of literature providing case studies of academic preparation programs in the US (Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn & Platt, 2011; Dyce, Albold & Long, 2013), although the impact of such programs is still unclear. Bergin, Cooks and Bergin (2007), for example, found that high school students in a university-sponsored program in the US were more likely than a control group to attend the sponsoring university, but equally likely to attend any university. Addi-racah and Israelashvili (2014) also found some positive effects of an outreach program for low-income students in Israel.

2.2 Embedded and Contingent Students

Not all members of a group that is underrepresented in PSE will experience the same barriers to participation or to the same extent. Ball, Reay and David (2002) make a distinction between secondary school students who are *embedded* in a path to PSE and those for whom participation in PSE is *contingent* on overcoming one or more barriers. Students who are embedded assume that they will attend PSE; indeed,

⁵ Although some of the studies we allude to in this paper are not Canadian, they suggest possible barriers to access to postsecondary education in the Canadian context.

their families and teachers would be surprised if they did not attend. For these students, the question is not whether they will attend, but which university or college. Students for whom participation is contingent do not assume that they will attend PSE, nor do their family and teachers make that assumption. These students may have to work harder than the embedded students to learn about PSE requirements, to determine how to pay for PSE and to convince those around them that attending PSE is worthwhile. In groups that are underrepresented in PSE, there will nevertheless be some students who are embedded in a path to PSE.

3 Access to PSE for Aboriginal Peoples

We discuss Aboriginal Peoples separately due to their unique legal and historical positions.

3.1 Who Are Canada's Aboriginal Peoples and Who Are Aboriginal Students?

The documents examined as part of this study (the viewbooks, SMAs and OUAC instruction booklet) chose their words, or terms, with care. Most use the word 'Aboriginal.' A few use the more specific terms 'First Nations,' 'Inuit' and 'Métis.'

'Aboriginal' refers to the many Peoples with Indigenous ancestry to Canada, legally classed into three large groups: 'First Nations,' 'Inuit' and 'Métis.' Two of these three, the First Nations and Métis, are subdivided further.

First Nations' Peoples are comprised of 64 distinct Nations, each with its own language and cultural/spiritual identity. These Nations live in 617 communities with a total population of 900,000 across Canada. There are just over 600,000 Status Indian Band members,⁶ or those having the right to live on a reserve and who are beneficiaries of treaties or friendship agreements.⁷

The Inuit are not classed with First Nations as they are not unique to Canada. However, they share a history of having their children sent to mission and residential schools. In 2011, the Inuit population was about 45,000 living in over 50 communities in the north.

The term 'Métis' encompasses three distinct groups. Probably the most well known are the Red River Métis of Manitoba. They are descendants of French trappers and traders, and Cree women. The second group of Métis with a collective identity is the offspring of Hudson's Bay Company factors (traders) and Cree or Anishnawbe women. Unlike the Red River Métis, this group is not associated with one distinct geographic location in Canada. A third group of Métis is defined by Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern

⁶ To be a Status Indian, a person must have at least one full-blood parent.

⁷ Population numbers from the website of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), <https://www.aandc-aandc.gc.ca>

Development Canada (AANDC) as anyone having one full-blood grandparent. Métis people have not signed treaties, although they have recently been legally recognized as Aboriginal Peoples.

3.2 Funding for PSE

Many people believe that First Nations' Peoples receive free PSE. This is not true. Canada's federal government allocates funding for PSE to First Nations Bands. This funding comes from a special Aboriginal Trust Fund consisting of land sales, mineral rights, etc., by First Nations' Peoples. A Status Indian who is a Band member may apply through the Band Office for PSE funding. However, Bands may not have sufficient funds to meet all requests. There is no guarantee of funding from year to year for a First Nations student from the Band. Bands also vary in terms of what expenses (e.g., tuition, books, supplies, living allowance) they will cover.

Many Aboriginal Peoples are also first-generation PSE students. Until 1969, the Indian Act of 1876 meant that Status Indians who left a reserve without permission from a government-appointed agent, voted in an election or sought PSE would legally lose their status and not be permitted to return or to pass on their status to their children. Even after 1969, many Aboriginal students continued to be forced to attend residential schools,⁸ which did not prepare them for PSE. Given this history, a mistrust of government-supported education programs and the continued underrepresentation of Aboriginal students in PSE is not surprising. Encouraging and supporting Aboriginal students to attend PSE is an acknowledged responsibility of all PSE institutions.

4 Methods

In this section, we describe how data were collected for this project through systematic analyses of universities' websites, viewbooks for prospective applicants, the OUAC instruction booklet and the SMAs, and through semi-structured interviews with university administrators. We also describe how these data were analyzed.

4.1 Universities

This study focused on Ontario's 20 universities receiving operating grants from the province. Although the Royal Military College is located in Ontario, it is funded federally and thus is not included in this study.

⁸ The last residential school closed in 1996.

4.2 Sources of Data

4.2.1 Strategic Mandate Agreements

In 2014, each university negotiated a Strategic Mandate Agreement with Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The final SMAs were posted publicly on TCU's website in August 2014.

We reviewed the SMAs with particular attention to two sections: (1) the "Key Areas of Differentiation," in which each university described its particular strengths, with a view toward showing complementarity with other institutions, and (2) the "Student Population" section, which TCU described as "recogniz[ing] the unique institutional missions that improve access, retention, and success for under-represented groups ... and francophones." As we noted in the introduction, TCU listed three groups as underrepresented: Aboriginal students, first-generation students and students with disabilities. TCU further described the "Student Population" section as an opportunity for universities to highlight "other important student groups that institutions serve that link to their institutional strength." Within that section, we looked for both which under-represented groups were identified and whether specific outreach/access/recruitment programs or initiatives were mentioned.

4.2.2 Ontario Universities' Application Centre Instruction Booklet

Applicants to first-entry programs at Ontario universities apply through the OUAC. Each university writes brief application instructions for inclusion in the OUAC instruction booklet. We reviewed these materials for references to under-represented groups, as well as information directed to under-represented groups.

4.2.3 University Viewbooks for Prospective Applicants

The annual Ontario Universities' Fair was held from September 19-21, 2014 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Two members of the research team visited the fair on September 20 and collected materials from each university's booth. Of particular interest were the viewbooks – glossy, full-colour booklets distributed to prospective students and their parents. At each booth, we also asked university representatives if there were any outreach programs or funding opportunities specifically for under-represented groups.

In reviewing the viewbooks, we looked for references to under-represented groups, as well as information intended for members of under-represented groups.

4.2.4 University Websites and Web Searches

Whereas the SMAs were an opportunity for each university to describe to TCU the role of outreach to under-represented groups within its larger mandate and the importance of outreach in differentiating

institutions, university websites are an opportunity for universities to try to shape the impression formed by potential applicants and the general population.

To complement the information universities provided in the SMAs, the OUAC instruction booklet and the university viewbooks, we examined the information universities were choosing to present through their websites. We conducted a systematic review following a protocol that we first developed and pilot tested with a subset of university websites. The protocol involved four search methods applied to 35 websites (for the 20 universities, the OUAC website listed 35 website addresses because some universities had separate addresses for different campuses or colleges), with 23 search terms.⁹

The four search methods are described below.¹⁰

Search method 1 required going to a university website and sequentially entering each of the 23 search terms into the search bar. For the first two pages of the search results, all links were followed and any information about outreach/access/recruitment in relation to the search term was collected. Search results in the form of press releases, research, mission statements, opportunities and programs offered by the university were all considered to be relevant and were also collected.

Search method 2 required using Google's web search engine at www.google.ca. Searches were conducted by sequentially entering the name of the university in quotes, the plus sign and the search term in quotes. Again, links for the first two pages of the search results were followed and any information about outreach/access/recruitment in the form of press releases, research, mission statements, opportunities and programs offered by the university was collected.

Search methods 3 and 4 required going to a university website and following links for prospective students (search method 3) and financial aid (search method 4). Upon following these links, any information about outreach/access/recruitment was collected. The web addresses for all followed links during these searches were also recorded.

Three research assistants conducted all four searches, with a 25% overlap (that is, five of the 20 universities were searched independently by two research assistants). A comparison of the results from these overlapping searches confirmed that the searches were conducted consistently and yielded identical or almost identical results.

⁹ The list of search terms was informed by the research literature and developed in consultation with the project's advisory group. The terms were: Aboriginal, First Nations, First Peoples, Métis, Inuit, First generation, Disabilities, Disabled, Francophone, Mature, Indigenous Peoples of Canada, Black Canadian, People of African ancestry, Economically disadvantaged, Under-represented groups, Underrepresented groups, Access, Accessibility, Outreach, Financial aid, Merit-based scholarships, Scholarships, Bursaries.

¹⁰ All searches were conducted on computers running the Windows 7 operating system and using Internet Explorer with "InPrivate" browsing to eliminate differences in search results due to customized user profiles.

4.2.5 Interviews with University Administrators

To complement the information available through the systematic reviews described in the preceding sections, we interviewed university administrators. The semi-structured interview protocol, for which we received approval from the University of Toronto's research ethics board, included questions such as: What groups or communities has your university identified as underrepresented? Are there specific outreach, access or recruitment activities for these groups? How did your university decide to focus on these groups? Are the outreach, access or recruitment activities for these groups supported by formal mission or policy statements? Have specific funds from TCU or from advancement campaigns supported these activities? How is the impact of these activities measured?

We contacted the university registrar or equivalent at each of the 20 universities to request an interview. A second request was sent to those who did not respond to the first request. Respondents at 16 of the 20 universities agreed to and participated in an interview. Of the four remaining universities, the individuals contacted at two universities declined an interview and two did not respond.

4.3 Analysis Approaches

Analysis of the information gathered was conducted in three stages: (1) description of the information, (2) close reading, and (3) identifying patterns.

4.3.1 Relating Access Initiatives to the Model

We began by describing and comparing the information found across the sources in relation to the four types of initiatives listed in Figure 1: outreach, recruitment, access through admissions, and retention. We also noted which under-represented group(s) the initiatives were intended to reach.

4.3.2 Close Reading

Beyond describing and comparing the information across sources, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to further analyze the data. CDA includes but is not limited to the analysis of texts, the direct developmental context of the text(s) being examined (e.g., the political historical context in which the text was developed and which influenced the framing of the 'problem'), and the text's larger social context (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 2005; Thomas, 2005). To this end, CDA "bridges the gap between the micro, meso, and macro levels of social order" in order to examine the ways in which "discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354). In this study, the macro or global level concerns the broader cultural and historical context of education. The meso or provincial level is captured by the SMAs. The micro or institutional level is represented by the websites, viewbooks and OUAC instruction booklet.

4.3.3 Identifying Patterns

Drawing on the sources of information described above, we identified similarities and differences in the universities' missions, the under-represented groups they identify as priorities for providing access, and their approaches to improving access.

We then considered the access strategies of each university in light of the contingent and embedded categories of students (Ball, Reay & David, 2002). Specifically, we examined the extent to which access initiatives were directed toward students in an under-represented group who were embedded in a path to PSE versus those whose attendance was contingent on overcoming one or more barriers.

5 Results and Discussion

This study addressed three research questions:

1. How have universities defined under-represented groups?
2. What university activities focus on improving access for students from under-represented groups?
3. How are universities measuring the impact of these activities?

In section 4, we described each source of information and the protocols for systematically collecting and analyzing the information. In this section, we present our findings.

First, a note about terminology. In the introduction, we defined how we are using the terms 'outreach,' 'recruitment,' 'access through admissions' and 'retention' in this study. These definitions were informed by the interviews, in which many of the respondents distinguished among these types of initiatives, though often with slightly different uses of the terms. For example, access was sometimes used as an overarching term, but sometimes referred only to initiatives that involved alternative admissions processes, or even "bridging" or "transition" programs that permitted students to begin taking courses and receiving academic support without having met the usual admission requirements. Responsibilities for the initiatives might also be assigned to different units within the university depending on the type of initiative (e.g., retention being in a student services unit separate from the admissions office) or the specific under-represented group (e.g., all initiatives for Aboriginal students being centred in a First Nations house).

5.1 How Have Universities Defined Under-represented Groups?

We asked the universities' registrars or their representatives what groups their university had identified as underrepresented and how the university had decided to focus on those groups. Most of the respondents referred to the three groups identified by TCU, but also suggested that their decisions to focus particularly on one or more of these groups (and, for some universities, on other groups as well) were shaped by their university's location, history and/or mission.

Table 1 shows how many of the 20 universities mentioned each of the three TCU groups (Aboriginal students, first-generation students and students with disabilities), as well as francophones, students from rural or small communities, and racialized minorities in the SMAs, viewbooks, OUAC instruction booklet and websites.

Table 1: Number of Universities Mentioning Each Under-represented Group in the SMAs, Viewbooks, OUAC Instruction Booklet and Websites

	SMAs	Viewbooks	OUAC Instruction Booklet	Websites
Aboriginal Students	18	17	8	20
First-generation Students	20	3	2	19
Students with Disabilities	12	10	17	19
Francophone	3	2	2	3
Rural/Small Communities	3	0	0	3
Racialized Minorities	2	2	1	1

In the SMAs, it is notable that, in addition to discussing under-represented groups in the “Student Population” section, seven of the 20 universities also listed serving specific under-represented groups among their “Key Areas of Differentiation.”

In contrast to the SMAs, which were written as an agreement between each university and TCU, the viewbooks were intended to be read by prospective students and their parents; they provide practical information about the application process but also attempt to convey a positive image of the university. It is interesting to note that, while all 20 universities mentioned first-generation students in their SMAs, only three did so in their viewbooks. In contrast, supports for Aboriginal students were featured prominently in both the SMAs and the viewbooks, in the latter case often with pictures of First Nations ceremonies and of rooms or buildings designed for the use of First Nations students.

Universities are allotted limited space in the OUAC instruction booklet, so it is interesting to note that fewer institutions provided information about access for Aboriginal students or first-generation students, but more provided information for students with disabilities. University websites, in contrast, have virtually unlimited space, so they provided information about and for more of the under-represented groups.

5.2 What University Activities Focus on Improving Access for Students from Under-represented Groups?

The definitions of outreach, recruitment, access through admissions and retention in section 1.3 grew out of our discussions with the universities' registrars and representatives. We quickly realized that when we asked about outreach activities, that was often interpreted as referring only to information sessions offered by a university or to programs that brought middle or secondary school students to campus, but did not include alternative application procedures. Therefore, we added a question asking what terms they used and how they defined them. As a practical matter, in some universities, responsibility for some of the activities intended to improve access was with the registrar's office, but responsibility for other activities lay with a separate student services office. Activities to improve access for Aboriginal students were often led by a dedicated office.

Table 2 provides examples, drawn from the SMAs and the OUAC instruction booklet, of relevant activities by Ontario's universities. This list is not exhaustive – these are not all of the activities described in these materials, and there are certainly many other relevant activities happening on Ontario university campuses that are not described in the materials – but it provides a sample of the types and range of activities. Although we have classified each example as representing one or more of the four types of activities, these classifications are not meant to suggest that, for instance, an example marked as retention may not also have an effect on outreach or recruitment. Indeed, advertising in the OUAC instruction booklet, in viewbooks or on websites that a university offers services to help students succeed in university – to retain them – may encourage potential students to apply.

Table 2: Selected Activities Described in the SMAs and the OUAC Instruction Booklet

University	Activities	Type(s)	Group(s)
Algoma University	"As university attainment rates in the region have traditionally been low, Algoma quite consciously takes a relatively liberal approach to admission standards. The policy is that admission requirements should be set at a point that welcomes students who have a good chance of benefitting from the education we offer and excludes only those who are unlikely to pass." (SMA - TCU & Algoma, p. 6)	Access through admissions	Unspecified
	"We are proud of our strong partnership with Aboriginal communities and our longstanding relationship with the Shingwauk Education Trust. Our university offers unique programs on Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) culture, history and language, including the province's only Bachelor of Arts program in the Ojibwe language. Algoma also does considerable outreach to Anishinaabe students." (OUAC, pp. 41-42)	Outreach; Retention	Aboriginal students
Brock University	"[Brock will offer] bridging courses for 200 more international and new immigrant students [that] will introduce core skills for degree level expectations, thus enhancing access, recruitment, and retention, and facilitating the development of community relations." (SMA - TCU & Brock, p. 7)	Access through admissions	New immigrants
	"You may request individual review by sending a letter, written by you, with supporting documentation directly to the Office of the Registrar, Admissions. The Admissions Office will forward all documentation to the Services for Students with disABILITIES Office (SSWD). Upon review, additional information may be required. The Director of Admissions, in consultation with the Manager of SSWD, will make all admissions decisions. Admission is not guaranteed." (OUAC, p. 48)	Access through admissions	Students with disabilities

University	Activities	Type(s)	Group(s)
Carleton University	<p>"Carleton University provides individualized academic accommodations and support services for students with disabilities through the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC). All main buildings on campus are connected by a common tunnel system that facilitates ease of travel during the winter months. Accessible rooms and a 24-hour Attendant Services program are available in residence for students with physical disabilities ... All qualified students with disabilities who provide proper documentation from a health care professional will be accommodated." (OUAC, p. 53)</p>	Recruitment; Retention	Students with disabilities
Lakehead University	<p>"Lakehead has established partnerships with local school boards to initiate the donor-funded Youth Achievement Fund – developed to systematically provide elementary students (starting in Grade 4) with connections to the University. Students will earn tuition credits by participating in the program. The Achievement Fund has 23 students enrolled currently with a target of more than 1,000 students by 2018." (SMA - TCU & Lakehead, p. 9)</p> <p>"Committed to promoting opportunities through education for Ontario's and Canada's Native peoples, Lakehead University offers a wide range of programs designed to encourage Native Canadians to pursue a university education in an academically, socially and culturally supportive environment. These preparatory certificate, diploma and degree programs are a unique blend of courses that assist Native students in maintaining their heritage while furthering their education." (OUAC, p. 67)</p>	<p>Outreach; Recruitment</p> <p>Recruitment</p>	<p>Unspecified</p> <p>Aboriginal students</p>
Laurentian University	<p>"First-generation postsecondary students comprise 60.9% of Laurentian's students, compared to the university system average of 17.8%. Laurentian continues to support first-generation students ... [through] Academic Advantage, Early Notification, a variety of workshops, programs and peer-assisted study groups, mentoring programs to match first-year first-generation students with upper-year first-generation students, and the Learning Assistance Centre." (SMA - TCU & Laurentian, p. 9)</p>	Retention	First-generation students

University	Activities	Type(s)	Group(s)
McMaster University	"McMaster offers bursaries and special outreach programs that support the participation of at risk youth. The McMaster Venture Camps program provides engineering and science camps and workshops to primary and secondary school students." (SMA - TCU & McMaster, p. 6)	Outreach	"At-risk youth"
Nipissing University	"Aboriginal Mentorship Initiatives, a series of experiential learning opportunities for upper-year Aboriginal students at Nipissing, with a cultural support component that nurtures current University students through Elder support, as they volunteer to mentor First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) students in grades 9-12 at local high schools, including Nipissing First Nation." (SMA - TCU & Nipissing, p. 6)	Outreach; Recruitment; Retention	Aboriginal students
Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) University	"[OCAD U] conduct[s] admissions presentations with American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation and provide[s] materials in alternate formats." (SMA - TCU & OCAD U, p. 7)	Outreach	Students with disabilities (specifically, deaf students)
Queen's University	"Queen's University offers Aboriginal candidates an additional and alternative pathway for admission to the first year of a full-time, first-entry undergraduate degree program. Apply through the OUAC and submit a separate letter to the Office of the University Registrar – Undergraduate Admission stating that you wish to be considered under this policy. You must also provide evidence of Aboriginal ancestry with your request." (OUAC, p. 106)	Access through admissions; Retention	Aboriginal students
Ryerson University	"Ryerson's Spanning the Gaps program is geared towards young people and adults who might not otherwise interact with or experience postsecondary education." (SMA - TCU & Ryerson, p. 8)	Outreach	Unspecified
Trent University	"Trent has enhanced its New Student Orientation (NSO) program to provide first-generation postsecondary students with support. In 2013, with the assistance of the MTCU First Generation Grant, Trent launched a "Rebound" student peer support program targeted to help students who are struggling academically." (SMA - TCU & Trent, p. 9)	Retention	First-generation students

University	Activities	Type(s)	Group(s)
University of Guelph	"Guelph has established a range of pre-arrival transition and support programs to enhance and sustain a supportive learning environment for first-generation postsecondary students." (SMA - TCU & Guelph, p. 9)	Retention	First-generation students
University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT)	"... UOIT's Peer Tutor program ... offers students the opportunity to work one-on-one with a trained peer tutor. These sessions allow students to receive help based on their individual needs at the appropriate pace and level of instruction. This also enhances engagement by helping students meet and share experiences with colleagues with similar backgrounds." (SMA - TCU & UOIT, p. 8)	Retention	First-generation students
University of Ottawa	"The University provides Ontario's francophone population with the most opportunities to learn in French in the province ... The University provides bilingual education and professional programs across all faculties." (SMA - TCU & Ottawa, p. 9)	Retention	Francophone
University of Toronto	"[University of Toronto has] a recruitment officer assigned to the recruitment of Aboriginal students into undergraduate programs." (SMA - TCU & Toronto, p. 7)	Recruitment	Aboriginal students
	"Student Access Guarantee (SAG) expenditures per recipient ... exceeded those of any other university." (SMA - TCU & Toronto, p. 7)	Retention	Students with financial need
University of Waterloo	"St. Paul's University College is piloting the Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Indigenous Community program. The program will teach 60 to 75 selected Aboriginal high school learners a combination of entrepreneurial design thinking and problem-solving skills required to begin to tackle significant problems with a view to create a business or self-funding service concept." (SMA - TCU & Waterloo, p. 8)	Outreach	Aboriginal students
University of Windsor	"The 4Winds Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) program for Aboriginal youth (grades 6-8), introduce[s] them to STEM as pathways to a university education." (SMA - TCU & Windsor, p. 6)	Outreach	Aboriginal students
	"The Gateway Program ... provides high school graduates with an average between 60.0% and 69.9% alternative paths for admission to the University." (SMA - TCU & Windsor, p. 6)	Access through Admissions	Students with lower high school grades

University	Activities	Type(s)	Group(s)
Western University	"In addition to outreach services to support disabled students' transition from high school to university, Western provides networking opportunities for students with disabilities and employers." (SMA - TCU & Western, p. 7)	Outreach	Students with disabilities
	"Indigenous Services (IS) provides assistance with filing an application, selecting programs/courses, and accessing special admission under Western's Aboriginal Access Admission Category. IS also provides extended support to Aboriginal students through its Academic Transition Opportunities (ATO) Program, which offers academic and personal/culture services including orientation, tutors on a weekly basis, workshop series, and regular meetings with an Academic Counsellor." (OUAC, p. 133)	Recruitment; Access through Admissions; Retention	Aboriginal students
Wilfrid Laurier University	"The Building Bridges to Success Program reaches high school youth from socially and economically disadvantaged communities." (SMA - TCU & Laurier, p. 8)	Outreach	"Students from socially and economically disadvantaged communities"
York University	"If you are an applicant from Aboriginal, First Nations or Métis populations, we can provide the support needed for transition to university study. The staff at the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services have extensive knowledge and experience working with Aboriginal applicants and families." (OUAC, p. 143)	Recruitment; Retention	Aboriginal students

The examples in Table 2 illustrate the wide range of activities in which universities are engaging to promote participation by students from under-represented groups. These include outreach programs, such as Laurier's Building Bridges to Success Program for students attending secondary schools in "socially and economically disadvantaged communities"; recruitment efforts for specific academic programs, such as Lakehead's certificate, diploma and degree programs for Aboriginal students; access through admissions initiatives, such as Queen's alternative pathway to admission for Aboriginal students; and retention services, such as Carlton's facilities and supports for students with disabilities and Laurentian's peer mentoring program for first-generation students.

5.3 How Are Universities Measuring the Impact of these Activities?

At minimum, each university reported the number and proportion of Aboriginal, first-generation, students with disabilities and francophone students at their institutions, as required by the Multi-year Accountability Agreements (MYAAs) with TCU. In the interviews, one university reported conducting formal internal

evaluations of an outreach initiative that received private funding; the evaluation was a condition of the funding.

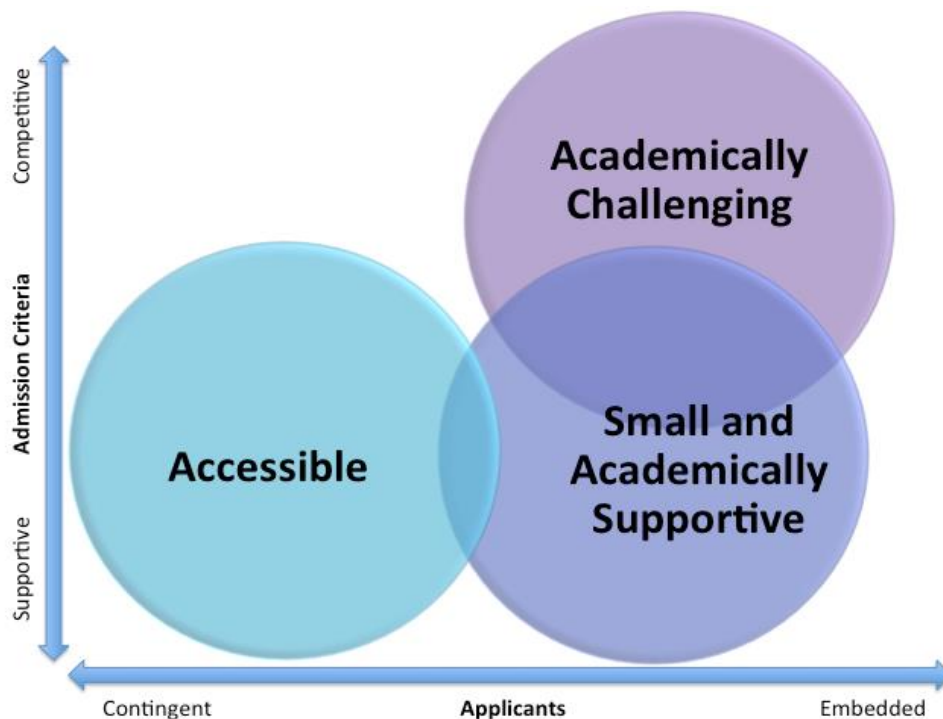
Some of the interviewees described the difficulties they encountered in trying to evaluate the effects of initiatives, including: (1) outreach activities were typically intended to encourage students to attend PSE, not a specific university; universities had no way of tracking young students over years and especially of tracking them to other universities or colleges; (2) identification of students in under-represented groups relies on the student's voluntary self-identification; if students choose not to self-identify, they cannot be counted in the evaluation; and (3) definitions, especially of first-generation, had changed over time.

5.4 The Role of These Activities within Universities

In looking across the sources of data, we also sought to identify patterns. We were particularly interested in how activities that were described in similar terms might have quite different roles at different universities.

Based on collation of all the data sources and after discussing and abandoning numerous possible ways of understanding the roles of these activities within universities, we developed descriptions of three broad 'types' of universities. All of Ontario's universities do not fit neatly into these types – some are hybrids or variations – but the types capture what we believe are important patterns.

Figure 2: Three 'Type' of Universities



The type that we have labeled 'academically challenging' includes universities that have high admission requirements. Within Ontario, these tend to be universities with doctoral and medical programs. Initiatives to attract under-represented groups to these universities may tend to target those who are already embedded in a path to PSE. We are not saying that all access initiatives at these universities will target embedded students or that this means such initiatives are not meaningful. However, when thinking about the larger problem of under-representation, attracting embedded students may decrease the problem of under-representation within the particular university, but will not address the problem across universities.

The 'small and academically supportive' type of university is easily recognizable from its advertising. Viewbooks tend to describe campuses as small and physically safe and to emphasize that all students will receive ample support to succeed academically. These universities have lower admission requirements and have typically recruited students who are embedded on a path to PSE, but they or their parents are seeking a comfortable experience.

The third type, which we have labeled 'accessible,' includes universities that see their role as providing an opportunity for a university education for any student who is interested. These universities have flexible admissions processes and offer remedial courses and a wide range of academic supports. They may also

develop academic programs to meet specific local needs. Interestingly, because these universities are committed to access, they are less likely to focus on specific initiatives for under-represented groups. By targeting contingent students broadly, these universities are likely to reach students who are in groups that are currently underrepresented.

5.5 Aboriginal Students

All 20 of Ontario's universities described access initiatives and programs for Aboriginal students. Almost all universities described physical locations dedicated to Aboriginal students. This often includes access to traditional medicines, ceremonies, traditional teachers and Elders. A number of universities hold a yearly pow-wow, with the majority of the planning done by the Aboriginal students. Many universities also seek and maintain ties with the local or regional Aboriginal communities. A number of the physical spaces dedicated to Aboriginal students host weekly meals, and universities may have special bursaries for Aboriginal students. The support services for Aboriginal students are willing to liaise with faculty and staff on behalf of the students. Some universities also offer dedicated academic support in the form of tutoring, writing and other workshops.

There exists variation in the application and admissions processes for Aboriginal students. Some universities had admissions criteria that were more flexible than others, with alternative minimum academic averages, for example. Universities also varied in whether they requested proof of Aboriginal ancestry.

It is unclear how well the information about these initiatives is reaching Aboriginal students. Over half of First Nations households do not have access to the internet (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012) and many who do have dial-up service and share one computer. This affects the application process through the OUAC system, as well as the ability to search for information about universities online.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Methodological Considerations

Some of the limitations of this study arise from the methodology. Despite establishing a protocol to conduct web searches and achieve high levels of correspondence across researchers, the protocol did not necessarily reflect how potential applicants would search for information. For example, it is unclear whether a student who is the first in her or his family to attend PSE would search for 'first-generation' programs.

In addition, we mostly conducted interviews with upper-level university administrators. We may have obtained richer information about the implementation and outcomes of the access initiatives had we interviewed directors of the individual programs.

6.2 Future Research

The intersectionality of under-represented groups – the extent to which a student can identify as a member of two or more under-represented groups (e.g., an Aboriginal student with disabilities) – holds important implications for universities in terms of providing counts to TCU and for the allocation of funding and resources, given that most information collected by universities is based almost exclusively on self-identification by students. This merits further study.

The effect of the current funding approach for access initiatives should also be examined. Some of the interviewees expressed frustration with the precarious nature of funding for under-represented groups and suggested that the timing and unpredictability of the funding makes it difficult for universities to develop and continue to improve access and retention programs. It is possible that adjusting when and for how long funding is provided could yield better results without increasing the total amount of funding.

Another important consideration is the extent to which the responsibility of improving access is being divided among the universities. That is, if some universities are working to improve access to PSE for particular under-represented groups, then might other universities believe they have less responsibility for those groups?

Exploring whether access initiatives are truly benefitting students for whom participation in PSE is contingent on overcoming barriers is also an important area of study. Providing access for students in the contingent stream should be of greater priority for universities given that these students typically require more assistance in accessing postsecondary education. For these students in particular, early outreach to help them choose appropriate courses in secondary school, for example, might be especially beneficial.

The findings have identified several other notable areas for further study. This study focused solely on first-entry university programs (i.e., programs at the undergraduate level). Throughout our searches for access initiatives, we found considerable information on access initiatives for second-entry programs (i.e., graduate studies and some professional programs), in addition to retention activities for both first- and second-entry programs. Furthermore, we found that many universities had agreements with and have directed access initiatives at local community colleges.

6.3 Conclusion

Our findings suggest that Ontario's universities recognize the need to improve access to PSE for under-represented groups, and each university has one or more initiatives to that end. Nevertheless, there exist issues that complicate the provision of access. For instance, the intersectionality of under-represented groups poses a challenge for universities in providing equitable access and in being able to accurately evaluate the impact of access initiatives. The issues alluded to in this report not only provide directions for future research, but also offer suggestions for ways of understanding how we can improve access for under-represented groups.

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