



# POLICY PAPER

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## *Student Engagement and Retention*

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## Introduction

Students want to be involved in the City of Hamilton but there are several barriers preventing them from doing so. These barriers range from deficiencies in public transit to a lack of awareness of employment or other professional opportunities available in Hamilton. Due to factors such as the lack of travel and financial accessibility and minimal job opportunities, many students are not staying in Hamilton after they graduate.

Engaging students in employment or professional networking opportunities, municipal affairs and cultural experiences will improve the retention of students after graduation. Securing employment is one of the main reasons that students want to attend and graduate from postsecondary education. Engaging students within the community will allow students to gain valuable work experiences, develop professional skills and network with potential employers in Hamilton. Civic engagement greatly improves the quality of postsecondary education. Engaging students in community matters and cultural experiences can also increase the exposure that students have to the city and expand their professional network.

The McMaster Student Union (MSU), McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should continue to identify and address the barriers to student engagement and retention. Over the past couple of years, the MSU, McMaster University, and the City of Hamilton have begun several new partnerships and ventures, such as the Municipal Advocacy Week, Discover Your City Campaign, and Change Camp. Furthermore, new developments in the city such as Light Rail Transit (LRT) by 2025, will make Hamilton an accessible city to work and live in. (City of Hamilton, 2021) These recent events have begun the process of bringing together students, the university and the city in a communal improvement process.

This policy builds on the findings of the Your City Survey 2.0 from the MSU and the 2020 Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey from the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OSSA) to provide clear areas of concern for students. By addressing these areas, the MSU, City of Hamilton, and McMaster University can continue to build a strong foundation for a city that engages and retains students after graduation.

## Communication & Engagement Strategy

**Principle:** The MSU believes that student retention in Hamilton after graduation relies on proper coordination and communication between the City of Hamilton and McMaster University.

**Concern:** McMaster University and the City of Hamilton inadequately promote awareness of the employment opportunities available to students in Hamilton.

**Concern:** McMaster students find there is not an appropriate number of advertisements for employment or other professional networking opportunities.

**Recommendation:** The MSU recommends the City of Hamilton and McMaster University should leverage social media platforms to effectively communicate employment opportunities to students.

**Recommendation:** The MSU recommends that the City of Hamilton and McMaster University

should expand the employment or other professional networking opportunities available in a certain specialization to attract recent graduates.

McMaster University students find that there are gaps in the advertisement and availability of employment and professional networking opportunities to students. In the Your City Survey 2.0, 80% of McMaster students valued a broad choice of places to work and professional job opportunities in their local community (McMaster Student Union, 2016). However, 51% of the participants reported that McMaster University fails to provide adequate advertised opportunities for students to get involved in the city of Hamilton. This includes opportunities such as internships, volunteering, and job shadowing (McMaster Student Union, 2016). Currently, the Hamilton Job Demand Report from January 2023, found that there are currently 8,307 vacant job postings of which 1,754 are job postings for university educated individuals (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2023b). This highlights a fundamental reason that students are not finding employment in Hamilton even though vacant positions exist, is due to a simple lack of awareness of what is being offered.

Social media is a major platform that university students and recent graduates use to connect with information. However, in the Employer One Survey, only 43% of employers in Hamilton used social media as a recruitment method in 2020. Additionally, 23% employers stated that the availability of qualified workers in Hamilton was poor and 60% of employers had at least one position that was hard to fill in 2020. The top reasons for the hard to fill positions was a lack of qualifications at 48% and not enough applicants at 46% (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2021). This showcases a major reason that employers are not identifying enough employees with the adequate university education or credentials is due to their use of ineffective recruitment methods. The City of Hamilton and McMaster University should leverage popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to communicate job opportunities to students with postsecondary education within Hamilton.

There is many highly qualified students that attended and graduated from McMaster University. However, the job prospects for university students and graduates can be limited from the lack of available employment opportunities. The Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey (OUSS) 2020 examined respondents who were enrolled in universities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area (GTHA) including McMaster University. In this survey, more than one-third of respondents reported they did not plan to stay in the city their university is located after graduation (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022b). This was mainly attributed to the inadequate number of employment opportunities in the city (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022b). The use of social media platforms for recruitment by the City of Hamilton and McMaster University can connect recent graduates with job opportunities and improve their retention in Hamilton.

Lastly, McMaster University is ranked among the world's top 50 universities for life sciences, nursing and medicine programs (McMaster University, 2023). In McMaster University, there also has been large growth in programs such as engineering and technology, social sciences, management and natural sciences (McMaster University, 2023). However, this represents a gap in the availability of McMaster University and the City of Hamilton to attract a large proportion of students and recent graduates in other programs. McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should find specializations in other fields to draw recent graduates to stay in Hamilton for employment.

This involves partnerships with local organizations or businesses to expand the employment or professional networking available in these fields.

## Employment Opportunities

**Principle:** The MSU believes that student retention relies on both proper coordination and communication with local organizations and the creation of opportunities to foster entrepreneurship.

**Concern:** McMaster students feel that there are not an appropriate number of employment and other professional networking opportunities available to them.

**Recommendation:** The MSU recommends a partnership with the Hamilton Hive organization, a network that provides resources and services to young professionals to improve student engagement within the community.

**Recommendation:** The City of Hamilton and McMaster University should partner with local organizations to establish more internship, co-op, work placements and volunteer opportunities within Hamilton.

**Recommendation:** The City of Hamilton and local businesses should establish a stronger physical presence on campus with improved and more job fairs and advertisement of job opportunities online.

McMaster University students find that there are gaps in the professional networking opportunities available within Hamilton. From The Your City Survey 2.0, around 42% of respondents believe that there are few professional networking and volunteer opportunities available within Hamilton (McMaster Students Union 2016). Based on the OUSS 2020, 74% of respondents would participate in work-integrated learning opportunities such as co-op, internships and other placements if they were available to them (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022b). However, in the Employer One Survey, only 6% of employers in Hamilton were focused on offering co-op, internships, apprenticeship and or work placements in 2022 (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2023a). This demonstrates there is an increased demand for work-integrated learning opportunities, but a lack of opportunities available within Hamilton. The City of Hamilton and McMaster University should work to increase the number of professional networking opportunities within Hamilton that local organizations or businesses can offer to students.

However, a common problem many McMaster students find is that there is a lack of effective advertisement for jobs and other professional opportunities. According to the Employer One Survey in 2020, 28% of respondents that were local businesses or organization within Hamilton found the recruitment process to be difficult (City of Hamilton, 2021). This suggests that employers find the recruitment process to be time and resource-consuming to reach applicants. The City of Hamilton and local businesses that offer these opportunities should improve their presence on McMaster campus with improved participation in job fairs. Currently, McMaster University holds two job fairs, one in the Fall and one in the spring over the course of 1 day or 2 days. This can be inaccessible to some students to attend, and these students can miss on employment or professional networking opportunities. The McMaster Student Success Centre (SSC) should also work to include more of these local organizations and business in the annual career fairs and OSCARplus job postings. The SSC should also expand the number of the job fairs that local organizations and businesses can participate in to reach more students. This can directly connect employers with undergraduate students and recent graduates that are

interested in these opportunities and improve their engagement in the workforce.

McMaster students find there needs to be increased supports for university students to find professional opportunities and network. According to the OUSS 2021, 17% of respondents enrolled in McMaster and other universities across GTHA reported they believed employment supports should be improved (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022c). This showcases that students need advice and assistance on their post-graduation careers. The Hamilton-based organization Hamilton Hive is an excellent resource for young professionals. The Hamilton Hive's mission is to provide young professionals with up-to-date information on jobs and networking opportunities to establish their careers in Hamilton McMaster University and the MSU should establish a partnership with the Hamilton Hive to connect students and recent graduates to programs, workshops, etc. to network and learn valuable skills. McMaster University and the Hamilton Hive should also develop mentoring initiatives that can connect students and recent graduates to local professionals within the Hamilton community. The engagement of students in the workplace and professional network in Hamilton can improve their retention after graduation.

## Transit

**Principle:** The MSU believes that student engagement and retention in Hamilton relies on improved travel and financial accessibility.

**Concern:** McMaster students feel as though the availability of public transit in Hamilton is a barrier to their participation in employment and other professional networking activities around the city.

**Concern:** Master students feel as though the reduced services of public transit in Hamilton during the summer and weekends is inaccessible.

**Concern:** McMaster students commuters find that the transit from the Mountain in Hamilton is unreliable.

**Concern:** McMaster students feel that Hamilton is not an affordable city to live in and participate in the community.

**Recommendation:** The City of Hamilton in partnership with MSU should further invest in improving the cost of the transit fares for McMaster students and recent graduates.

**Recommendation:** The City of Hamilton in partnership with MSU should further invest in improving capacity and operational hours of transit services to address the concerns of McMaster students, who comprise a significant portion of ridership.

McMaster students feel concerns around the affordability and accessibility of transit in Hamilton. Based on the OUSS 2021, many respondents enrolled in McMaster and other universities across Greater Toronto and Hamilton area reported mandatory bus fees be optional or reduced (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022c). From The Your City Survey 2.0, nearly 50% of McMaster students stated that affordability was very important when deciding where to live and work post-graduation (McMaster Students Union 2016). This demonstrates that the cost of bus transit fees can be a concern for university students even with the HSR pass, especially for recent graduates that lose access to the HSR bus pass. The City of Hamilton and MSU should

work to adjust the cost of the transit fees for undergraduate students and recent graduates based on the concern. The City of Hamilton should consider an extension of the HSR Bus Pass for recent graduates to improve their retention in Hamilton.

Another important part of accessibility is travel accessibility. Public transit should always be available to students during operational hours, and operational hours should accommodate with all II schedules and mobility capacities. However, around 30% of respondents in The Your City Survey 2.0 felt that the city was below average for accessibility via public transit (McMaster Students Union 2016). This was due to concerns around the capacity of the buses and the headway or the time between the arrivals at the bus stops. The MSU recommends that McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should improve the number of buses during peak times and increase shelters for students to wait between buses.

Additionally, many undergraduate students in Ontario identified that accessible transit routes should connect large Ontarian cities directly to their university campus in the OUSS 2020 (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022c). The City of Hamilton has approved the 14-kilometre Light Rail Transport project that would connect McMaster University to the Eastgate in Stoney Creek and travel through downtown Hamilton (City of Hamilton, 2021). LRT would provide easy and direct connections across Hamilton with electrically powered single cars or trains running across this route by 2025. The complete journey time in LRT would take 37 minutes and the amount of time between transit vehicle arrivals would be 5 minutes except for a 12-minute headway from the Mountain to the Airport. LRT would operate 12 vehicles with around 200 passengers per hour or almost 3,000 passengers per hour (City of Hamilton, 2022).

The City of Hamilton also recommends the Government invest in the expansion of segregated bus lanes with the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project from James Street to Waterfront through the Hamilton International Airport in 2025. The complete journey time in BRT would take 40 minutes and the amount of time between transit vehicle arrivals would be 3 minutes except for 15-minute headway from the Mountain to the Airport. Currently, these bus route takes a total time of 45 minutes under traffic conditions and headway during peak periods can reach 20 to 30 minutes. This investment by the City of Hamilton can provide integrated transit with short and predictable waiting times, simple transfers and punctual departures or arrivals (City of Hamilton, 2022).

However, there is limited improvement in the Route 27 that runs from the Downtown to the Mountain in Hamilton which serves the Mountain section on Upper James Street. While all other routes will receive 6 buses per hour in the peak periods, this Route 27 will receive only 3 buses per hour in the base service periods (City of Hamilton, 2022). McMaster students who are commuters find that the transit on the Mountain in Hamilton is inaccessible as the headway can reach upwards of 1 hour to reach McMaster University despite the 15-minute drive. McMaster student who are commuters also find that HSR services in the weekend and the summer is limited as the headway can reach a long time. Therefore, the City of Hamilton and HSR should consider the 'Re-envision HSR' proposal from McMaster students which recommends: nine additional routes, six rapid routes and 112 more bus stops. This includes rapid routes which run every 10 minutes during peak hours. The City of Hamilton and HSR should also consider Monday to Saturday busses from 5 a.m. to 2 a.m. and Sunday busses from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. (Beattie, 2023). Further improvements in the accessibility and the affordability of public transit can improve the involvement of McMaster students and recent graduates in Hamilton.

## Network and Community

**Principle:** The MSU believes that McMaster students should be able to find cost-friendly cultural opportunities within Hamilton which can improve student engagement and retention.

**Concern:** McMaster students believe that there are not enough cultural opportunities to engage with the Hamilton community or that the financial costs pose a barrier to their participation.

**Concern:** McMaster students believe that McMaster University and the City of Hamilton inadequately promote awareness of cultural opportunities available to students within Hamilton.

**Recommendation:** The City of Hamilton should collaborate with McMaster University and the MSU to make cost-effective cultural opportunities available around the city.

**Recommendation:** The MSU recommends the City of Hamilton and McMaster University should leverage social media platforms to effectively communicate cultural opportunities to students.

McMaster students find that the availability and the affordability of cultural experiences hinders their involvement in Hamilton. While considered fairly affordable by students, there is still a large percentage of students who state that Hamilton is not an affordable city to live and engage in activities. According to the Your City Survey 2.0, 23% of students stated that a barrier to their involvement in cultural experiences around the city is finances (McMaster Student Union, 2016). McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should partner with local places and organization to increase cost-effective cultural opportunities available around the city. McMaster University students and recent graduates have identified gaps in the advertisements of opportunities, and this can extend to cultural experiences. Social media is platform that can disseminate information on these cultural events to university students and recent graduates to encourage their participation. McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should leverage the use of social media to share cultural opportunities that students can get involved in throughout Hamilton. The engagement of students in cultural experiences can improve their experience in Hamilton which can lead to their retention after graduation.

## Communication and Advertisement: OscarPlus

**Principle:** The MSU believes that McMaster students should be able to find employment and other professional networking opportunities with ease which can improve student retention.

**Concern:** McMaster students find OscarPlus, the job posting portal under the McMaster Student Success Centre difficult to navigate to find relevant work experience or events.

**Recommendation:** McMaster University and the Student Success Centre should improve the categorization of employment or other professional opportunities by relevant fields or educational experience in the OscarPlus website.

**Recommendation:** McMaster University and the Student Success Centre should improve the organization of professional events and workshops on OscarPlus to help McMaster students



find them with ease.

McMaster SSC is currently one of the key services that distributes information about jobs and other professional opportunities both within and outside the McMaster community to students. As previously mentioned, 51% of McMaster students find McMaster University does not provide proper advertisement for employment and other professional networking opportunities. McMaster University and SSC should improve the design portal of the OSCARplus job posting system for students to easily see advertisements for these opportunities. Based on the Employer 2020 Survey, employers in Hamilton identified that hard to fill positions were due to a lack of qualifications at 48% and not enough applicants at 46% (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2021). This suggests that many students or recent graduates with the appropriate educational or work experience difficulties in job searches. Currently, the Oscar Plus platform provides a long list of the job opportunities and volunteer or experience where only the job title is available. To find the relevant education or experience, McMaster students must read through lengthy text where they can struggle to find this information. McMaster University and SSC should improve the design portal of the OSCARplus job posting of opportunities to allow students to quickly find advertisements that match with their educational program and work experience.

SSC also provides many professional events or workshops for students or recent graduates to network with employers in Hamilton or others in Hamilton. Based on the Employer 2020 Survey, word of mouth, personal contacts or informal networks were the top recruitment methods for employers in Hamilton (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2021). Today, the Oscar Plus platform has a calendar filled with events where only the title of the event is available. To find more information about the event, McMaster students must read through lengthy text which can cause them to lose interest. McMaster University and the SSC should improve the design portal of the OscarPlus system to allow students to quickly find events or workshops based on their purpose and outline. Engaging students in events, workshops and job searches can increase their participation in the workplace in Hamilton.

## Technology

**Principle:** The MSU believes that student retention and engagement in Hamilton relies on improved opportunities to gain relevant technical skills and learn of employment.

**Concern:** McMaster students believe that there are not enough opportunities to learn technical skills for employment or other professional networking opportunities.

**Concern:** McMaster students feel as though there is not enough awareness on the platforms or events to find employment and other professional networking opportunities.

**Recommendation:** McMaster University in partnership with the Student Success Centre should further invest in improving the number of training available to gain relevant technical experience.

**Recommendation:** McMaster University and the Student Success Centre should improve the advertisement of the Oscar Plus job posting systems so students can find opportunities with ease.

McMaster students can lack the technical and digital skills needed for employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the dependency on technology, so technical and digital literacy

skills are in demand for employees. In the Employer One Survey, employers in Hamilton found that one of the reasons for the hard to fill positions was a lack of the technical skills at 39% (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2021). McMaster University should work with the SSC to improve the number of the workshops or events to help students learn technical or digital skills to address any gaps. McMaster students can gain technical skills through relevant work experience, but the OUSS 2020 found that 62% of university students throughout the GTHA have not participated in work-integrated learning opportunities. This lack of relevant technical skills for the workplace in the undergraduate student body was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022b). The engagement of McMaster students in training to gain technical skills can improve their job search and retention in Hamilton after graduation.

As mentioned, McMaster students find there are problems with the accessibility of advertisements about jobs or professional opportunities that can hinder participation in the workplace. McMaster University should work with SSC to advertise platforms to find employment or other professional networking opportunities such as Mosaic or OscarPlus. McMaster University in partnership with the SSC should leverage social media and online websites to advertise these platforms. The more awareness that McMaster students have about job advertisement platforms, the higher student engagement and retention in the workplace across Hamilton can be.

## Academic Opportunities

**Principle:** The MSU believes that student retention and engagement in Hamilton relies on improved opportunities to network and gain relevant work experience within the community.

**Concern:** McMaster students believe that there are not enough community-based experimental learning and placement courses to engage with the Hamilton Community for all faculties and degrees.

**Concern:** McMaster students find that undergraduate research opportunities are inadequately advertised to students and difficult to find with ease.

**Recommendation:** McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should partner with local organizations and initiatives to improve the number of experimental learning and placement courses available for McMaster students.

**Recommendation:** McMaster University and the SSC should develop a separate platform for students to find advertisements of research opportunities.

McMaster students can lack access to placement or community-based courses that can impact their ability to find work integrated opportunities. Work-integrated learning opportunities are predominantly available and funded in the business and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022c). Data from Statistics Canada shows only 18.7% of graduates in Arts and Humanities had participated in work-integrated learning opportunities. However, 64.6% of graduates in Engineering or Architecture and 47.3% of Mathematics or Computer and Information Sciences had participated (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2022c). McMaster University should increase the number of the community-based experimental learning and placement courses available to all faculties and degrees. As previously outlined, only 6% of the Employers in Hamilton offered co-

op, internships and other work placement (Workplace Planning Hamilton, 2023a). The top reason that employers can fail to hire an adequate number of co-op students is from financial constraints, community-based or placement courses can overcome this barrier. McMaster University and the City of Hamilton should work with local organizations to increase the number of experimental learning or placement courses available. Engaging students in these course-based work-integrated learning opportunities can improve their skills and professional network to increase their participation in the workplace.

McMaster students especially first-year students can face difficulties in finding research opportunities. McMaster students and the SSC should develop a separate platform where students or recent graduates can find advertisements of research opportunities. This includes research opportunities under faculty members or available research programs at McMaster University or affiliated organizations in Hamilton. McMaster University and SSC should also leverage the use of social media to inform students of this platform and relevant research opportunities. Research opportunities can help students and recent graduates gain relevant work experience and develop their professional network. This can also help students and recent graduates pursue further education and find employment in Hamilton.

## Lack of Institutional Connection/Belonging

**Principle:** The MSU believes that McMaster students should be able to share their opinions on community matters with ease which can improve student engagement.

**Concern:** McMaster students feel as though there is a lack of opportunities to voice their concern about community matters, which is a barrier in their participation around the city.

**Recommendation:** The City of Hamilton in partnership with the MSU should further invest in improving the number of surveys, forums, and in-person events for students to share their concerns.

**Recommendation:** To facilitate the successful coordination and communication between McMaster University and the City of Hamilton, students should have representation in municipal affairs.

Lastly, McMaster students find there is not an adequate number of opportunities for engagement and leadership. Based on the results of the OUSS 2020, only 23% of the respondents from McMaster University and other universities in the GTHA found their university actively engaged students on community affairs (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2023c). Currently, youth in Hamilton within the age group of most university students and recent graduates feel this concern. According to the Youth Strategy Surveys, 77% of the respondents between the ages of 15-29 years in Hamilton reported there needs to be more opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making (City of Hamilton, 2022).

The municipal committees associated with economic development, transit and transportation, housing, and community relations should engage with McMaster and its students to develop mutually beneficial goals by creating student seats on said committees. This will also allow for the externally focused groups in the MSU, such as the Student Community Support Network, the Advocacy Street Team, the External Affairs Committee, and the Community Engagement Coordinator, to maintain effective and efficient communication with the city of Hamilton. The

MSU should consider more in-person engagement events such as the recent SRA Engagement Event which many students attended to discuss university affairs. The engagement of students in municipal and community affairs can improve the connection that students have to the city which can increase the number of graduates that stay in Hamilton.

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