

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT @ WORK

Transforming Ontario's
Student Assistance
Program



Digital
Government
CASE STUDY SERIES



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JANUARY 2020



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Digital Government

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Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge funding from the Government of Ontario and the those who participated in interviews. The views expressed are the authors alone.

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ISSN 2563-0121

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2016 the Government of Ontario has introduced a series of major reforms to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). At the same time, Ontario has been in the midst of establishing and formalizing its lead digital unit, the Ontario Digital Service. The province has seen its first and second ministers responsible for digital be appointed, from two different governments, and OSAP featured prominently in the 2018 provincial election. Ontario also passed sweeping legislation in 2019 with direct implications for digital government practices and standards in the province. This legislation builds on multiple new public service guides and high-level support for digital ways of working in government. This case study focuses on the application of digital ways of working for major policy and operational transformation of the OSAP program in 2016-2017. Based on twelve interviews with actors directly involved in the OSAP program redesign, the case provides a concrete perspective on the real-world work of applying digital techniques to public policy problems, including: user research, user centered service design, interdisciplinary teams, and iteration and agile ways of working. The case study explores the various organizational, policy, and operational challenges accompanying the digital reform of the OSAP program. The case study also underscores the importance of public service and political support and leadership when implementing digital transformation agendas. Finally, the case study identifies the broader implications of digital for the work of today's governments.

1

INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the 2017-2018 academic year Ontario's Cabinet Office Digital Government (CO Digital) team worked closely with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) to overhaul many aspects of the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The reforms included policy changes but also service transformations that levered digital ways of working to streamline processes, increase student access to the program, and improve user experience. The reform initiative was spurred by a 2016 policy decision to increase post-secondary education availability, particularly to students from lower-income families. OSAP's redesign came after years of calls by think tanks and advocacy groups for reform to post secondary funding, and from a government program review that sought to improve the internal public administration and public facing elements of OSAP. According to then MAESD Minister Deb Matthews, the goal was to offer a program that is "easy to understand, that is predictable, that is more generous, and that is more progressive" (Brasil 2016). In launching the new program, both Matthews and then Premier Kathleen Wynne stressed the challenges that users were facing when accessing the existing program.

The results of the reform were significant: nearly 50,000 additional students applied for OSAP in 2017 as compared to 2016, roughly a 10 per cent increase in applications (Rushowy 2017). Before the reforms, under the pre-2016 system, approximately one third of student aid was provided in the form of non-repayable grants and two-thirds in repayable loans. In 2017-18, 92 per cent of funds were spent on non-repayable grants and just 8 per cent on loans (Friesen 2019). Additionally, a new web-based 'OSAP calculator' that provided students with a quick self-determination of their OSAP eligibility and total educational cost was used over 1.2 million times in its first twelve months (Hartley 2018).

This case study draws on twelve unstructured interviews with key actors involved with the digital reform of the OSAP platform to document the drivers of success of, and the barriers confronted by, governments looking to adopt digital ways of working for policy, program, and service transformations.

First, the rationale for digitizing the OSAP service is outlined alongside a review of the policy goals underpinning the project. Then, a brief background on digital government is provided to inform the subsequent examination of the OSAP digitization. Key milestones, challenges, and innovations involved in the OSAP case are reviewed along with analysis of how the OSAP team managed to overcome various challenges to OSAP reform. Last, the case reflects on the OSAP case to generate insights for Digital Government Units (DGUs) and other public service practitioners trying to build better government services in an era of digital public service renewal.

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BACKGROUND

OSAP is a mixed student loan/grant program directed primarily at lower-income families that relies on a needs-based allocation of funds to provide financial aid to students in Ontario pursuing post-secondary education. Administered by MAESD, it is meant to supplement financial contributions made by students or their families towards their tuition, but also takes into account living costs, additional fees, and school supplies needed by students. In 2016 prior to the implementation of the Liberals' OSAP reforms, just over 300,000 students participated in the program (Office of the Premier 2016). For low-income families taking advantage of the program, grants made up roughly 60 per cent of distributed money, while the remainder was in the form of repayable loans (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2018). While OSAP was already a significant public program at the time, the 2016 provincial budget looked to expand and revamp the program as part of its objective of improving access to post-secondary education. By March of 2017, the government released its new student assistance program which re-oriented a significant portion of the funding towards non-repayable grant (rather than loan) based allocations – a launch which also featured a new online 'OSAP calculator' for applicants to quickly determine the amount of money for which they would likely be eligible.

Digital Government and Digital Government Units

While digital information and communication technologies have become ubiquitous in modern societies, many governments have been slow to adapt their institutions and tools to digital ways of working. Early digitization efforts by governments generally consisted of creating websites to promote available programs or services, or were primarily internal in nature, using information technologies to collect and manipulate data to improve managerial decision-making and to support the daily business of government operations (Bretschneider and Mergel 2011, 191). The late 2000s and 2010s ushered in what many at the time termed 'Government 2.0', which emphasizes online digital interactivity, participation, and collaboration between the public sector and citizens (Roy 2017; Noveck 2010). At the same time, massive policy failures resulting from poorly designed digital systems and interfaces, increased scrutiny of high-cost, low-return government technology procurement practices, and improvements in private sector digital service offerings put digital service

capacity building on the agendas of governments globally (Clarke, 2019a, 2019b). In turn, recent digital government reforms have focused on improving service design and delivery through so-called ‘platform government’ and adoption of user-centered design and agile management approaches (Mergel, Edelman, and Haug 2019).

In practice, using new digital ways of working with a focus on users and iterative or ‘agile’ ways of working has proven a significant challenge for government. Governments around the world have experimented with a variety of institutional arrangements to adopt digital ways of working and to build capacity to apply them to government work. Often this has led to the creation of dedicated digital teams, both within and external to departments that are at the forefront of digital government transformations.

One way in which we can better understand digital government transformation is through focusing specifically on those teams, which we refer to as Digital Government Units (DGUs). Common across DGUs is a guiding ethos of “user-centered design, data-driven decision making, open source technologies and platform models of service provision” (Clarke 2017, 2). They mark a departure from earlier models of digital governance in the public sector which mostly relied on third-party providers, instead, deliberately recruiting in-house talent with the goal of building long-term digital capacity. Because of their positioning within government and dedicated digital mandate, DGUs have the potential to significantly speed up digitization efforts while maintaining alignment with government-wide priorities and practices (Mergel 2019). Evidence thus far demonstrates DGUs’ success in terms of talent recruitment and efficiency gains on particular service redesign projects (Clarke 2017; Mergel 2019), however, their capacity to transform complex government systems has been questionable (National Audit Office 2017).

In their 2016 review of approaches to public sector digitization, the OECD identifies three categories of DGUs. The ‘Digital Transformation Office’ approach establishes an office within government to oversee smaller digital transformation projects across government – potential ‘quick wins’ – while establishing digital standards and providing technical guidance. While this approach yields tangible gains, it has been criticized for its ‘frequently disruptive’ nature which may culturally alienate this type of DGU from change-resistant government departments. A more uniform strategy is found in the ‘Central Co-ordination Approach’ that assigns a chief information officer (CIO) to establish government-wide digital standards. This approach aims



to leverage economies of scale, however, tends to result in a less agile and less reactive DGU that takes longer to implement programs. Lastly, the ‘Decentralised Co-ordination’ approach emphasizes flexibility for government departments. While often a central co-ordinating office will still be part of this approach, its initiatives tend to be less coercive and concrete in nature, leaving it up to the individual departments to find their own solutions to broader digital challenges. The risks of this approach include uneven implementation and difficulties designing and managing programs and digital platforms across departments.

Within this framework, the CO Digital team, along with their successor the Ontario Digital Service (ODS) conform closest to the ‘Digital Transformation Office’ approach. The ODS was founded in May of 2017 and brought together the CO Digital team and the Cabinet Office team responsible for the Ontario.ca website. The ODS mission statement is to “make government services simpler, faster and better for people in the internet age” (Ontario, “Digital Government”). This objective has been reflected in the programs they deliver, some of which include streamlining Health Card and Driver’s License renewals, creating a suite of digital standards and guidelines, and designing a new financial aid calculator for OSAP. Ontario has continued to press ahead with an ambitious digital reform agenda with the 2019 passage of the *Simpler, Faster, Better Services Act* which commits the Government of Ontario to user-centered program/ service design and “to delivering simpler, faster and more easily accessible services” (*Simpler, Faster, Better Services Act 2019*).

Within this broader context, the OSAP case provides an opportunity to better understand how digital units and departments and agencies can work collaboratively to deliver policy, program, and service-level transformation by leveraging digital approaches and ways of working.

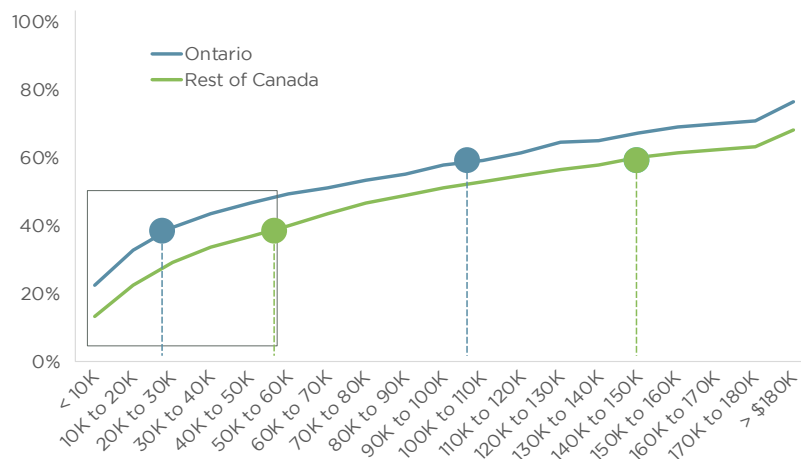
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POLICY OBJECTIVES

The broader policy context within which the OSAP digital reforms unfolded is important to underscore. The Liberal government had committed to opening access to post-secondary education, both in the name of reducing socio-economic inequality and to foster the knowledge economy in the province. As per Figure 1 below, low income students were less likely to participate in post-secondary education. Improving the policy design and administration of OSAP was part of this broader policy agenda. In essence the goal was to “ensure that all of the kids who want to go, get to [go to] university, full stop.”¹ The ideal product at the end was to have a ‘one-stop-shop’, recognizing that in addition to functional accessibility, the OSAP redesign needed to bring with it a *perception* of access so that people from lower income backgrounds would be encouraged to consider post-secondary education.²

FIGURE 1

Post-secondary education participation rates of 18-21 year olds, living at home, by parental income, 2015



Note: Percentage of families with at least one child in full-time postsecondary education, of couple and lone-parent families with one or more children aged 18 to 21 residing at home.
Source: Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, February 2018.

At a broader policy level, OSAP reform was meant to generate a highly skilled workforce for Ontario, the government having identified that 70 per cent of new jobs created in Canada would require higher education or specialized skills (Ontario Ministry of Finance 2016)³.





The Technological Context Shaping OSAP and its Reform

OSAP was also reformed using digital ways of working as a response to political demand to deliver more cost-efficient and more user-friendly services. From a technological standpoint, OSAP was built on top of longstanding and largely ill-fitting legacy Information Technology (IT) systems. In 2011, the government had released an OSAP mobile application supporting an existing web portal that allowed students to check their application status (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2011). However, the portal was described as a “bolted-on web interface,” which came as the result of a failed project with an external consulting company in 2008, and was thus redesigned shortly after the mobile launch.⁴ Even after this redesign, the web process was difficult to complete. As one project team member described the process:

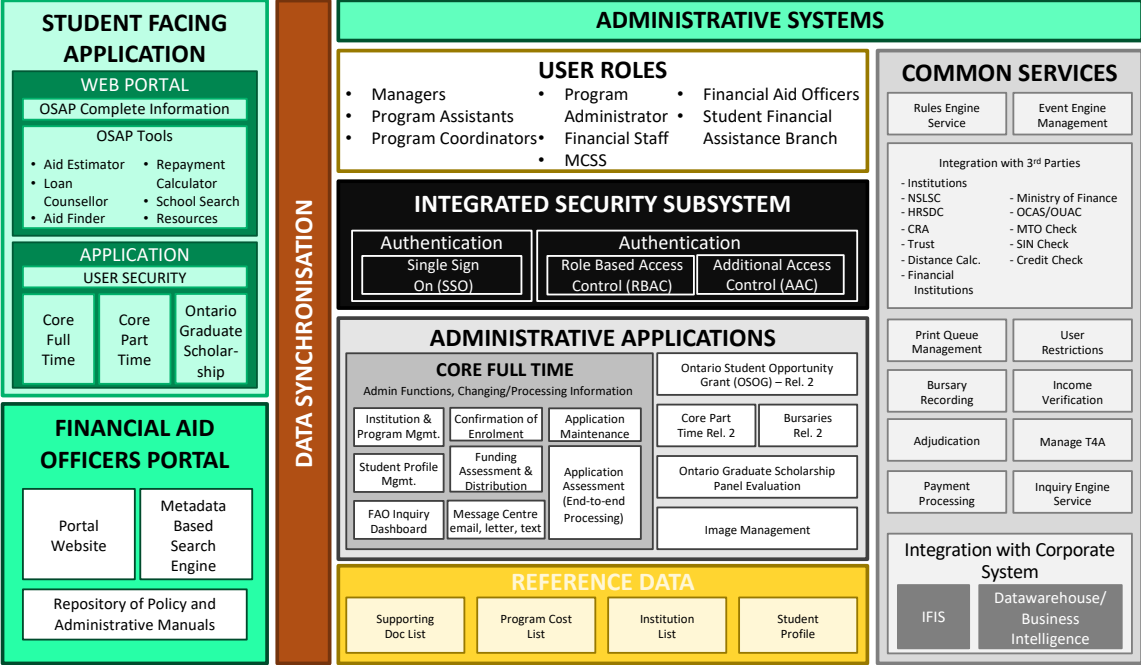
Before, you could probably search OSAP and then you would find about 12 web pages and you would see a whole bunch of information and 95 per cent of the people would say, ‘Oh my God this is so complex, shut your machine off and go home.’⁵

Users were overloaded with information, confused by the language being used at each stage of the application, and getting frustrated while navigating the site. In fact, leading up to the digital reforms accompanying the 2016 OSAP project, the Government of Ontario’s website was in such a poor state that it was being used in presentations about digital government as a prime example of what *not to do*.⁶

Three primary technological goals emerged, all focused on simplifying how information was provided and collected. First, the interview process needed for the calculator had to be simplified so that students could actually complete their application with ease. Second, the information provided from the calculator had to be simplified. Third, vocabulary had to be simplified and streamlined, for example, to avoid confusion around the difference between a ‘grant’ and a ‘loan’ (Fagan 2017). Figure 2 provides a sense of the complexity of the back-end systems involved and the significant work undertaken to modernize the OSAP IT infrastructure.

FIGURE 2

New OSAP Processing System (2011-2016)



Source: Author correspondence with interview participant.

Beyond the OSAP re-design itself, the digitization of OSAP was meant to generate various organizational benefits. The initiative was framed as an opportunity to link up existing systems and departments. By improving the web-interface and cleaning up the IT back-end, those leading the project hoped to generate advanced analytics on users’ demographics and on website reach, and information describing how students were accessing and navigating the site⁷. Consequently, a successful project would provide an exemplar that they hoped would help to embed user-centered design and agile ways of working within the government for the future.⁸

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KEY CHALLENGES

Administrative Differences and Technological Capacity

Though the existing website and mobile application provided a foundation for the OSAP reform efforts, the presence of a legacy IT system introduced migration issues. The existing technologies supporting OSAP were described as “barely functioning” and both ground-level public servants and managers alike were frustrated with the outdated software⁹. Additionally, CO Digital faced human resource challenges in its early days. Unlike many major tech or finance companies, the Ontario government had not previously invested in developing a strong pool of tech talent. One ministerial adviser echoed concerns that they “didn’t have enough knowledge of the digital policy issues that [could] be informed by digital thinking” when the initiative first started¹⁰. The lack of public servants who intimately understood design and digital technology thus became not just a problem for digital delivery, but rather, for effectively delivering on the higher-order policy objectives that inspired the OSAP reforms in the first place.

The most significant technical challenge however, was found at the university level. Each of the fifty universities and colleges in Ontario had different administrative systems and processes of registration

The most significant technical challenge however, was found at the university level. Each of the fifty universities and colleges in Ontario had different administrative systems and processes of registration. Given these inconsistencies, simplification efforts on the web platform could lead to issues where the OSAP application and administrative processes or platforms from individual universities failed to align. Varying levels of tuition between

programs at the same university also presented a challenge. For example, a student applying to both science and engineering degrees could only submit a single OSAP application, but if they applied to OSAP for science and were accepted into only the engineering program, the output of the OSAP calculator would be inaccurate.

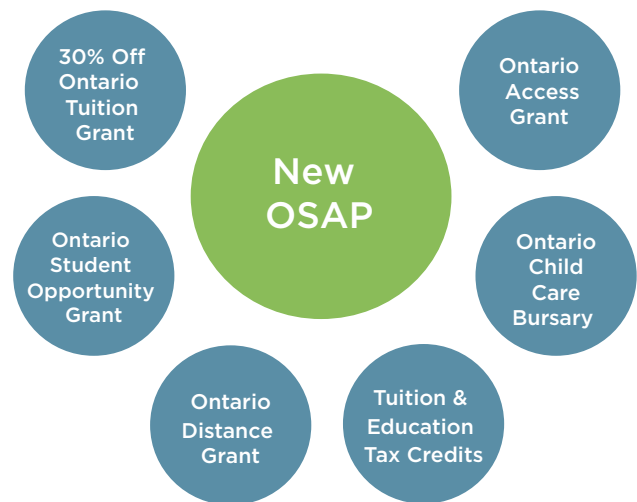
Policy Complexity

Determinations of individual eligibility for OSAP were fairly complex and littered with “hundreds of rules.”¹¹ Moreover, the complexity of the OSAP program itself, which included over twenty different types of grants at the time, presented challenges for students as did confusion around the various non-OSAP debt relief supports such as the Ontario Student Opportunity Grant (OSOG) and the Tuition and Education Tax Credits (TETC), both of which the Department of Finance managed. This complex policy maze meant that parents and students could not easily determine the costs of their post-secondary education.

Within the Ontario government, CO Digital had to ensure that its digital goals were aligned with the policies in place for OSAP, as established by MAESD, while also being cognizant of budget allocations and role of Finance in managing non OSAP post-secondary benefits. The mixed federal-provincial involvement in the funding of education through student loan programs was another complicating matter, resulting in the need to align any reform to OSAP with federal policy frameworks and funding arrangements.

FIGURE 3

The new OSAP model



Adapted from Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Department, 2018.

Bureaucratic Culture and Stakeholder Buy-in

A major challenge for OSAP transformation was cultural in nature. Generating the political demand for technological reform in bureaucratic organizations with relative resistance to transformative change presented a significant hurdle. To successfully mobilize any change, CO Digital had to ensure that they would be seen “as a supporter and help to the ministries” rather than “just another annoying group – a gnat.”¹² The CO Digital group was described as “young, techy... cowboys of the government” with great ideas, but without an operational understanding of day-to-day ministerial practices¹³ (a similar reaction to Digital Government Units has been seen in other jurisdictions, see

Clarke 2019a). In addition, while the location of CO Digital at the center of government, within Cabinet Office, provided many advantages, it also brought with it an adversarial set of relationships, whereby ministries could see it as part of “the centre of government which doesn’t play by the same rules, but enforces a series of rules and templates on the rest of government.”¹⁴ Within the public service then, the value of digital ways of working had to be demonstrated and buy in secured from public servants set in longstanding ways of working or soured by successive incremental attempts to reform or patch the OSAP program with temporary fixes.



A major challenge for OSAP transformation was cultural in nature

External stakeholders were also initially resistant to change. The Ontario Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, a key liaison between the MAESD and universities, were hesitant to support the initiative. College registrars were also uninterested in technological reform, as it would add a significant workload for them. While these groups generally understood the vision behind digital reform and could, to some extent, see the long-term benefits on balance, they

were reluctant to support the platform redevelopment. Without stakeholder agreement, the project could not proceed due to the decentralized nature of its actual administration.



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KEY ENABLERS IN THE REDESIGN OF OSAP

Drawing Insight From Users Through Agile Design Approaches and User Research

MAESD, often supported by CO Digital, was able to use a variety of digital ways of working to implement service and policy reforms that put users at the center of the broader reform process. In this case, the users were: high school students, college and university students, students with their parents, and mature students. The reforms began with research consisting of a 2016 survey of 1600 Ontarians as well as ten focus groups in five cities in the same year.¹⁵ This research was designed to:

- Understand how PSE is paid for by families and the extent to which this is a concern for parents and students
- Determine perceptions of student debt load
- Gauge impressions of OSAP and better understand where these impressions come from
- Explore the role OSAP can play in PSE¹⁶

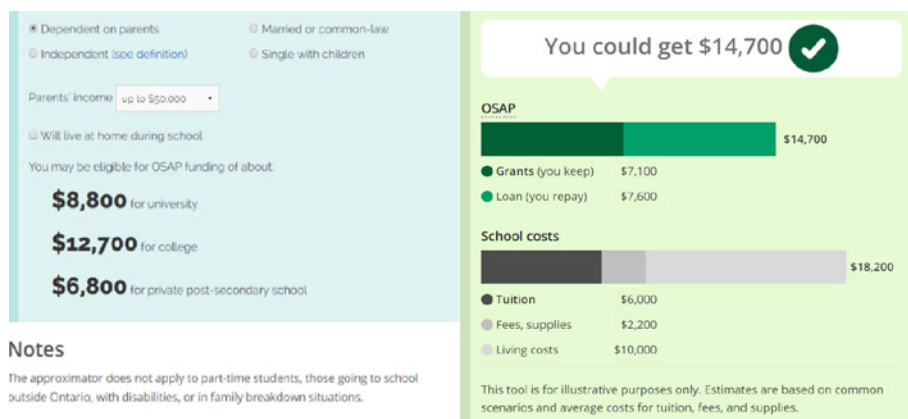
In developing the aid calculator, the project team also engaged in user testing exercises. Beginning with brainstorming a list of key factors needed to estimate financial aid, CO Digital began by flowcharting the estimation process, then simplified this process by removing any redundancies. From this structural design step, the team then moved to create one-page visual interface mockups that could be tested with users. This included web testing using Skype interviews with high school students as well as in-person consulting with parents using paper mockups.

The OSAP team “prototyped, tested, and iterated dozens of times” using test groups – and they have continued to make further improvements to the calculator since its launch (Fagan 2017). The creation and use of journey maps– a visual storyboard of a user’s experience navigating a platform in various scenarios – combined with better access to user data from the webpage and calculator, all provided essential feedback and input into the calculator design as well as overall OSAP application interface and service design. One respondent suggested that they regretted not leveraging journey maps earlier on in the process to better inform their redesign.¹⁷ Even in its limited use, this tool was particularly helpful for identifying roadblocks to users as they navigated the service.

These types of hands-on user engagements resulted in the OSAP team discovering that designing questions with a students' understanding of key vocabulary was more effective, since parents were then able to understand the language as well. CO Digital also ensured that the entire OSAP site was reprogrammed to conform to the new Ontario Government's plain language standards and numbers were rounded to the nearest hundred to remind users that the estimate was only an approximation rather than an exact amount to be paid out (Fagan 2017).

Beyond language changes, what is most clear in the differences from the prototypes to the final version is the amount of information provided. Many of the early prototypes presented a series of caveats that affected an individual's ability to access OSAP, yet these caveats often did not apply to users and thus confused, rather than informed, students. Instead, the revised website brought these caveats under a single designated category for 'Special Circumstances' and collected the vocabulary into a list of 'OSAP definitions'. In addition, only core information was displayed at the outset, instead hiding additional notes beneath hyperlinks. School fees and supplies were combined into a single cost category, alongside the major categories for tuition and living expenses. Further, the revised site used clear visuals to communicate complex information, for instance, using a bar graph with a sequential color palette to concisely show the breakdown of costs and aid (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
Re-designed OSAP Calculator



Source: Author correspondence with interview participant.

Last, the team improved the functionality of the calculator itself by ensuring it generated an estimate that would update live as users changed degree type, income, school location, and dependency status.

Matching Digital Redesign with Organizational Redesign

Several novel organizational arrangements were put in place that led to a successful outcome for OSAP reform. At a high level OSAP's reform was facilitated by the Digital Government Board within the Premier's Office. Once a month, a mix of senior staff from the Premier's Office, ministerial staff, Deputy Ministers, business line leads, and external advisers would come together in a roundtable. A CO Digital staff noted that they had "never seen anything like this before" in their career as a public servant.¹⁸ The board was an example of an experimental participatory mechanism to inform policy making, where all individuals would propose a variety of different ideas in an informal setting.¹⁹ The primary benefits of this system — as opposed to the hierarchical process of ministerial briefings — were generating a plurality of ideas and enabling a two-way dialogue between the civil service and politicians, which traditionally would only include a civil service presentation to the minister. Further, a 'digital charter' was established, clarifying the responsibilities and obligations of the various participants (CO Digital, MAESD policy and information technology staff). The charter was modeled on a format developed by 18f — a Digital Government Unit within the US government — and clarified the outcomes and shared deliverables for the partners, without prescriptively defining specific ways of working that would constrain the teams.

Regular working level meetings (weekly and bi-weekly) that brought together the integrated team of CO Digital and MAESD policy and IT staff supplemented the digital board and project charter. The MAESD (and Digital Government) minister regularly attended these along with staff to see first hand progress and engage with prototypes and discussions on next steps.

The placement of CO Digital within the Cabinet Office was noted as a 'very conscious decision' that led to the direct benefit of close proximity to the Premier²⁰. As a result, the OSAP team within the CO Digital unit was able to easily bring together "a bunch of different pieces that don't report to each other through the regular hierarchy of government" to collaborate during the regular integrated OSAP meetings²¹. Increased access to information was an ancillary benefit of being located within the Cabinet Office, a placement which allowed CO Digital to be immediately informed of political developments and political interest in the OSAP file.

Sustained Political Support and Early Effective Engagement

The OSAP project saw significant engagement from the Premier's Office. OSAP was first identified as ripe for reform through the Treasury Board Secretariat-led program review, then chaired by Matthews before she moved to MAESD where she also assumed new responsibilities as Minister for Digital Government. OSAP reform was branded as a 'signature piece' for the Ontario government and was a flagship initiative of the 2016 Ontario Budget. As Deputy Premier, Minister of Treasury Board, then at MAESD with responsibility for Digital Government, Minister Matthews ensured strong political leadership as well as sustained interest in introducing digital ways of working to the Ontario government. Those interviewed noted the importance of active leadership and several identified the sustained efforts of the minister in initiating and driving the reform process.²² The Liberal government's promise of 'free tuition' was frequently promoted and the digital reform of OSAP became a key component in realizing this promise. A 'this cannot fail' ethos emerged around the project within the Premier's office, not only because of the implications for service delivery if the digitization was unsuccessful, but also because of the potential political fallout from a policy or operational failure.²³

Alongside sustained top-down political support, OSAP's digitization benefited from careful efforts to gain buy-in from key internal and external policy stakeholders, especially those that had proven resistant to OSAP reforms. Internally, within the public service, MAESD used a mix of communication strategies including cooperative discussions regarding the project's early development and by issuing constant positive reminders of the shared benefits that could be derived from the reform. MAESD also ensured that each stakeholder felt at ease to share information truthfully and could expect candid feedback and updates. CO Digital additionally leveraged a variety of multi-stakeholder groups to generate political support and buy-in for OSAP's digital reform. One such example was the 'Insiders Group', a collection of public service employees across Ontario who provided feedback on controversial issues.²⁴ Opinions generated from this group of public servants were then used to demonstrate support to senior management.

Alongside the Insiders Group, those leading the initiative also forged partnerships with various external institutions, universities, and colleges prior to implementation, which led to a relatively positive view of the digital reforms proposed. While organizations like the Canadian Federation of Students and the Ontario Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators were generally apprehensive regarding digital transformation, the OSAP team focused on building relationships with individuals within each organization who would then ‘go to bat’ for them.²⁵

An Integrated and Interdisciplinary Project Team

The initiative saw the formation of an extremely strong project team within a short period of time, even bringing on board technical staff from the United Kingdom who had previously been involved in digital transformation projects there.²⁶ The CO Digital team worked with the MAESD staff and the department’s IT cluster to leverage existing strengths within the department, mitigate or solve for the impacts of legacy systems, and work around and troubleshoot emergent issues in integrating policy needs with operational and service level aspirations.

As noted above, regular integrated meetings between the CO Digital and department policy and IT staff were a key contributor to the OSAP reforms’ success. It was clear that these meetings and the integrated team itself were not without friction and conflict, particularly in the early days. However, sustained political leadership and public service leadership among the various units, and clear guidance in the form of an agreed upon project charter, were ultimately essential ingredients for successful reform. Regular check-ins featured demonstrations of work-in-progress and opportunities for various team members and political leaders to provide input and perspective, fostering collective ‘buy in’ for the project.

Regular integrated meetings between the CO Digital and department policy and IT staff were a key contributor to the OSAP reforms’ success

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IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION & PUBLIC SECTOR RENEWAL

Through applying a digital lens to OSAP, the Government of Ontario was able to advance an ambitious and transformational policy objective and close the gap between policy direction at the political level and service delivery at the administrative level. Major policy changes to the structure, eligibility criteria, and resourcing were coupled with service delivery innovation that levered digital ways of working. The result was a highly publicized redesign of the web platform that was generally well-received by the media and the public (Chiose 2017; Ottaway 2018), and that was key to the government delivering on one of its flagship policy commitments.

The initiative's success can be explained in large part by the coincidence of a precise policy problem, a high degree of political interest, and deliberate efforts to build policy capacity in light of lessons learned from previous policy failures. The Ontario government wanted to “move from one in five poor people going to post-secondary to four in five going”, understanding that the gap was partly due to a perception of unaffordability.²⁷ This particular digital initiative fed into political goals of improving access to education by the Liberal Party as well as the Minister of Digital's personal interest in reform. The OSAP team also made a point of maintaining close relationships with key political and administrative (mostly university-related) actors. Finally, the government had learned from a series of failed/mixed-success endeavours with regards to redesigning OSAP technology applications, beginning with their 2008 outsourcing approach, followed by a 2011 launch of a mobile application, and then a series of efforts to refine the program proposal internally from 2012 to 2017.

The process through which OSAP was redesigned provides a practical example of how design-oriented thinking can be applied to support public service transformation. The user-centrism, iterative design, and experimentation privileged by design thinking (Clarke and Craft 2019) were beneficial in creating an online service that was much more accessible and friendly – even to those unfamiliar with digital technologies – in comparison to the early mockups (and even more so when contrasted to the previous website). In this case, user experimentation – including significant user research and journey mapping exercises – was key to the initiative's success, given it uncovered previously unknown user challenges that undermined the program at the point of delivery.

The pre-release experimentation allowed the project team to make small, incremental changes that could be immediately tested with their sample groups “dozens of times” at a negligible cost (Fagan 2017). This approach ensured the project avoided massive failure at launch, as has often resulted when public services are developed internally without iterative redesigns based on user feedback throughout the development process.

Yet this case does not strictly provide evidence for the benefits of specific digital design approaches, such as user research and agile project management. It also underscores the importance of coupling these new approaches with careful efforts to generate political and administrative support for program and service reforms. In order to avoid the previous bolt-on approaches to digital government taken by Ontario, which left the website in an embarrassing state and users frustrated, the initiative demanded significant political and administrative commitment to undertake the more onerous, but ultimately essential task, of overhauling legacy IT systems, service design approaches and ill-fitting organizational and management structures. The case illustrates the importance of having both the right people with tech know-how and the right administrative systems to effectively transform an established government program.

Finally, the OSAP initiative demonstrates the effectiveness of ‘Digital Transformation Office’-type DGUs and shows how they can succeed amidst change-resistant groups and individuals. The OSAP team made a point of finding individual allies within resistant organizations and leveraged the Digital Government Board as a means of horizontal communication to simultaneously improve ideas while generating consensus. Regular integrated team meetings and demonstrations of work in progress secured buy-in from various groups within and beyond the government. These efforts were reinforced by sustained political leadership. The OSAP case provides evidence that DGUs can be a useful tool for introducing new digital approaches and techniques to government, that they can facilitate talent recruitment and deployment, and that DGUs can effectively support departments in their efforts to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of government programs and services.

Post Script

After the 2018 election, and since research for this case study concluded, the new Progressive Conservative Doug Ford-led government introduced sweeping changes to OSAP. They eliminated the existing grant regime in favour of a return to a system similar to the pre-2016 format - featuring a mix of grants and repayable loans. In addition to changing the thresholds for student OSAP qualification, the government mandated a 10 per cent system wide cut in tuition fees. The 2018 changes introduced to the OSAP policy did not involve the ODS, nor did they emerge from the digital ways of working described in this case (e.g. user-centered design, agile project management). At the same time, the Ford government has signalled its broad support for digital government transformation by expanding the resources and authorities of the ODS, creating a new deputy minister-level role - the Chief Digital and Data Officer—and passing the *Simpler, Faster, Better Services Act 2019*, as noted above. The ODS continues its work, and since the OSAP reforms has engaged with various departments and agencies within the Ontario public sector on specific digital service reform projects.

Annex 1 List of Interviews

Participant	Date
Government official 1	December 13, 2016
Government official 2	April 6, 2017
Government official 3	August 5, 2016
Government official 4	March 28, 2017
Government official 5	March 31, 2017
Government official 6	November 8, 2016
Government official 7	August 5, 2016
Government official 8	August 5, 2016
Government official 9	August 5, 2016
Government official 10	August 5, 2016
Government Official 11	September 2, 2016
Government official 12	September 2016

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Government official 1, interviewed December 13, 2016.
- 2 Government official 2, interviewed April 6, 2017.
- 3 Government official 3, interviewed August 5, 2016.
- 4 Government official 4, interviewed March 28, 2017.
- 5 Government official 5, interviewed March 31, 2017.
- 6 Government official 3.
- 7 Government official 2.
- 8 Government official 1.
- 9 Government official 3.
- 10 Government official 6, interviewed November 8, 2016
- 11 Government official 6
- 12 Government official 7, interviewed August 5, 2016.
- 13 Government official 4.
- 14 Government official 8, interviewed August 5, 2016.
- 15 Government official 4.
- 16 Government official 4.
- 17 Government official 2.
- 18 Government official 7.
- 19 Government official 6.
- 20 Government official 6
- 21 Government official 2
- 22 Government official 4.
- 23 Government official 2.
- 24 Government official 7.
- 25 Government official 4.
- 26 Government official 5.
- 27 Government official 5.



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