

Platform Analysis

Ontario Liberal Party

OCUFA

Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING PARTY PLATFORMS

Over the course of the election campaign, all of the major parties will present their vision for the future of the province through their election platforms. In order to assess the impact of what each party is proposing for university professors and academic librarians, and for the higher education sector more broadly, OCUFA has developed a set of criteria for assessment. When it comes to higher education, the ideal platform would:

- Increase per-student funding to bring it in line with the national average, allowing institutions to pursue their core functions – teaching and research – free of financial strain;
- Provide funding to hire adequate faculty to bring the student-faculty ratio in Ontario in line with the national average, while addressing the increasing precarity of academic work;
- Introduce measures to control the cost and ensure the accessibility of high quality higher education for students;
- Protect the collective bargaining rights of faculty and faculty associations across Ontario;
- Provide the legislative space for the university sector to develop pension solutions that will ensure the fairness and long-term sustainability of pension plans in the sector

FUNDING

The Ontario Liberal Party platform addresses funding for universities only in the context of providing targeted funding for specific projects in the university sector. For example, the Liberal platform reiterates the 2014 Budget's commitment to investing almost \$500 million over 10 years to support deferred maintenance projects. According to the Council of Ontario Universities, however, as of February 2010 there was a \$2 billion backlog on deferred maintenance. The Liberal platform also commits to providing \$250 million in research infrastructure funding over three years (although it is not made clear in the platform whether this funding would be directed toward university-based research projects).

The Liberal platform includes proposals for a series of new initiatives – including the creation of new university campuses, providing new undergraduate spaces and offering online courses for credit through Ontario Online. The platform does not provide any indication of how and at what level any of these initiatives will be funded. This oversight is troubling, given that the funding in place for current initiatives is inadequate. Without a clear articulation of where funding for these new initiatives will come from, the risk of continued underfunding is significant.

There is no recognition in the Liberal platform that on a per-student basis, government operating funding for universities in Ontario is the lowest in the country and the platform includes no proposals that address the need for increased overall funding for universities.

FACULTY HIRING

The Ontario Liberal platform does not include any reference to the need for funding to support increased faculty hiring, or addressing the increasing precarity of academic work.

AFFORDABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Ontario Liberal platform promises to continue the 30 per cent off tuition grant for eligible students. The 30 per cent off tuition grant is only available to Ontario students in a direct entry program, have been out of high school for four years or less and a family income of \$160,000 or less. In 2012-13, 230,000 college and university students were eligible for the grant. In the same year, there were nearly 450,000 students enrolled in university alone. As such, the grant does not respond to concerns about the affordability of university education in Ontario in a comprehensive way. Nonetheless, the 30 per cent off tuition grant does provide tuition relief for those students and their families who qualify for it.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS

The Ontario Liberal Party platform does not include any reference to the protection of collective bargaining or labour rights, nor does it propose any legislative measures that would directly threaten collective bargaining in Ontario. The platform does include a commitment to “responsible fiscal management,” which includes program spending reviews and transformation of public service delivery. While the Liberal government under Premier Dalton McGuinty intervened legislatively in collective bargaining in order to achieve its fiscal goals, we have not seen this kind of intervention under Premier Kathleen Wynne, and the Liberal platform reflects that shift.

PENSIONS

The Ontario Liberal Party platform promises the creation of an Ontario Retirement Pension Plan (ORPP). This proposal represents an important step towards ensuring retirement security for all Ontarians – including those without a workplace pension.

In addition to the creation of a new provincial pension plan, the Liberal platform commits to working with the postsecondary education sector to make pension plans more sustainable. Prior to the election call, OCUFA was working with sector partners and the provincial government to develop pension options for the sector. In order to move forward with our work on pensions, however, asset transfer framework legislation is needed. Without this legislation, there is no legal or regulatory framework that specifies the process by which the transfer of assets from a single employer pension plan to a jointly sponsored pension plan can occur.

This needed legislation was included as a schedule in the 2014 Budget bill. The Liberal platform promises to reintroduce all government bills – including this pension legislation – that was before the House prior to the election call, and to have all of those bills passed within the first two years of their mandate.