

Higher education in Ontario

Questionnaire for political parties in the 2014
provincial election

OCUFA

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

FUNDING

Despite increased investments in the early 2000s under the Reaching Higher plan, rapidly increasing enrolment over the same period has meant that the core activities of the university – teaching and research – continue to be underfunded, as any funding increases have gone towards accommodating increased enrolment. Per student funding for universities in Ontario is the lowest in Canada, and it has been for over a decade. In 2011-12 Ontario's per student operating grants were 35% lower than the rest of Canada average.

What will your party do to ensure Ontario universities have the funding they need to provide a high quality education to every student?

FACULTY HIRING

Between 2000-01 and 2011-12, enrolment in Ontario's universities increased by 64 per cent, while the full-time faculty complement increased by only 30 per cent. This gap between enrolment and faculty hiring, means that Ontario's universities have the highest student-faculty ratio in the country, at 28-to-1 compared to 21-to-1 in the rest of Canada. A higher student-faculty ratio means that students are learning in larger classes, with fewer course options and fewer opportunities for meaningful interaction with their professors – all key indicators of a high quality post-secondary education.

How does your party plan to address the full-time faculty shortage in Ontario?

To offset the gap between rising enrolment and stagnating full-time faculty hiring, significant numbers of part-time and contract faculty were hired between 2000-01 and 2011-12. OCUFA estimates that the number of part-time faculty in Ontario rose by about 87 per cent between 2000-01 and 2011-12. Rather than being used as a temporary stop-gap to accommodate a one-time surge in undergraduate enrolment, the use of part-time contract faculty has become an entrenched strategy in Ontario's universities. Contract faculty are excellent teachers and researchers, but they lack the job security, institutional resources and terms and conditions of employment enjoyed by their full-time colleagues.

What will your party do to address the increasing precarity of academic employment in the province?

AFFORDABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Ontario has the highest tuition fees in Canada, at \$7,259 for an average undergraduate student. Fees are even higher for graduate and professional degrees. Ontario students also pay for the largest proportion of their education compared to their peers in the rest of Canada – 46 per cent, compared to 27 per cent in the rest of Canada. High educational costs mean that many students who choose to pursue higher education will graduate with high levels of student debt.

What will your party do to control tuition fees and ensure Ontario's universities are affordable to every willing and qualified student?

LABOUR RELATIONS

Labour legislation that guarantees fair treatment of employees, respects freedom of association, secures health and safety protections, and provides employment and income security underpin economies that are both prosperous and more equitable.

What will your party do to ensure fair labour laws that benefit all Ontarians?

PENSIONS

Together with other employee groups in the university sector, university faculty have been working to make our pensions more sustainable in the long term, including the exploration of multi-employer jointly sponsored pension plan (JSPP) options for the sector. In order to make progress toward more sustainable pensions, a legal and regulatory framework that would allow the transfer of pension assets from a single employer pension plan to a JSPP needs to be in place. The broad strokes of this legislation were outlined in the 2014 Budget.

What steps will your party take to ensure that the university sector is able to develop and implement fair and sustainable pension solutions?

RESEARCH FUNDING

One-third of research and development in Canada takes place at universities. Over the past decade, the research and development policies of successive Ontario and federal governments have placed increasing emphasis on the commercialization of university research, university-private sector partnerships and shared-cost arrangements. Strong support for basic research is the foundation of a robust research and innovation system. By focusing on commercialization, current policies place pressure on universities to divert already scarce resources away from basic curiosity-driven research and research in the social science and humanities.

How will your party use research policy and funding to strike a balance between basic research and research commercialization?

CHANGES TO TEACHER TRAINING

In June of 2013, the Government of Ontario announced significant changes to teacher education programs in the province. Changes included doubling the length of teacher education from one year to two years, reducing enrolment from 9,000 to 4,500 places, and cutting per-student funding by one third. The enrolment and per-student funding cuts came as a surprise to the sector and left universities scrambling to deal with the financial impact of these changes.

What will your party do to ensure that the transition to a new teacher training model in Ontario doesn't create chaos at universities where students in the Faculty of Education account for a significant portion of enrolment?