

COVID-19 and the academy

What will the pandemic mean for Ontario's universities, faculty, and students?

May 20, 2020

OCUFA

Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

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The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations has been the provincial voice of university faculty since 1964. OCUFA represents over 17,000 professors, academic librarians, and other academic professionals in 30 faculty associations across Ontario.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has impacted every aspect of our lives. In Ontario, we are seeing signs of hope, but there is no indication of when physical distancing measures will lessen or what our new, post-COVID-19 reality will look like. Within academic institutions across the province, the sudden and dramatic shift in course and service delivery had a jarring effect on both full-time and part-time faculty, as well as academic librarians. We believe that universities in Ontario will be integral to the fiscal, social, and cultural healing that needs to take place after this pandemic. We offer the following brief in the context of the recent consultation held under the auspices of the *Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee: Ministry of Colleges and Universities Advisory Council*.

Since March, academic staff have been devoted to getting through the term while taking the best possible care of their families and communities. On campus, members have undergone an overnight shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), defined as a temporary move of all educational sessions and teaching content to online platforms due to crisis or emergency circumstances.¹

This shift has created a myriad of challenges for faculty, and faculty associations continue to hear concerns from their members regarding increased workloads, pedagogical issues such as grading, student evaluations of teaching, research projects, tenure files, sabbatical leave, and job security for contract faculty.

As the summer and fall semesters approach, it appears that remote teaching arrangements are not likely to be as temporary as we all hoped. While some research and campus operations may resume by the start of the fall semester, most universities have formally announced that the bulk of the fall term will be remote. A variety of plans are being developed by institutions but the majority call for a hybrid approach with a small number of graduate and low enrolment undergraduate classes continuing on campus. It is also expected that, where physical distancing is possible, some research projects will also resume on campus. This reliance on ERT is creating new challenges and exacerbating some of the tensions faculty experienced in the initial move to remote teaching. Adding to this tension is the fact that most universities only consulted faculty superficially or not at all about these looming challenges. If we are going to succeed in delivering post-secondary education through this pandemic, it is imperative that collegial governance and the collective bargaining rights of faculty be respected.

This policy brief is designed to provide some context on these issues and provide pragmatic solutions about how we might move forward together to protect and strengthen what universities do best during these turbulent times. The following areas will be addressed in this submission:

- ▶ Equity Implications of COVID-19
- ▶ Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19 on Academic Staff
- ▶ Collegial Governance
- ▶ University Funding Considerations
- ▶ Remotes Teaching and Online Learning
- ▶ Impacts of COVID-19 on Students

¹ It is important to be clear about terminology. There are clear differences between courses specially designed for an online learning experience and assessment and courses that are urgently moved to remote delivery platforms in response to this public health crisis. The goal and purpose of ERT is not to provide a robust and fully designed alternative learning environment, but to provide access to content and teaching material where in-person delivery is not possible.

Equity implications of COVID-19 on Ontario campuses

Like many other workplaces in Ontario, universities and colleges have been severely impacted by the global pandemic and resulting economic crisis. COVID-19 has highlighted and amplified existing inequities within the academy. Academic staff with caregiving responsibilities, disabilities, and underlying conditions; with precarious employment, who are largely women and racialized or Indigenous faculty; and with limited access to equipment and internet, are disproportionately bearing the brunt of emergency measures on campus.

Faculty members and academic librarians across Ontario have stepped up to play their part in “flattening the curve” through supporting social distancing measures and moving to ERT. For many academic staff, the cancellation of classes and the immediate move to online platforms – while ensuring that students are supported – have led to unprecedented increases to workload and anxiety levels.

How has COVID-19 impacted precarious and equity-seeking academic staff?

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted existing gendered, race, and class inequities and faculty are not immune from these social exclusions. Faculty and academic librarians with elder and child care responsibilities, the majority of whom are women and single parents, are experiencing immense pressure to continue working overtime while caring for their loved ones as a result of school and daycare closures.

Academic staff with disabilities, many of whom may already be struggling due to inadequate accommodations, are also being asked to increase their workloads; many without the adaptive technologies, interpreters, and other necessary tools to which they previously had access. These pressures are further exacerbated by the lack of support and consideration from administrations about their mental and physical well-being as they work tirelessly to adapt to new methods of course delivery, support students, and manage their own pre-existing conditions.

Indigenous cultural pedagogical approaches to teaching are also being impacted by these measures. With conversations about the appropriateness of providing culturally specific and land-based courses online, some Indigenous and racialized faculty are seeing their courses no longer offered for the coming semesters. This is also true for community and land-based research projects which, on some campuses, are being placed on hold for the foreseeable future. For pre-tenure and contract educators, there are significant impacts on hiring, tenure, and promotion.

Access to high-speed internet has emerged as a significant access issue. Some Indigenous faculty and rural or remote members who have limited or no access to high-quality internet are experiencing challenges with teaching remotely and working from home. Academic staff who have been asked to work remotely will, therefore, have differing abilities to do so depending on their access to the internet.

These issues are compounded for contract faculty within these groups who are not being compensated for the additional time, energy, and emotional labour they are spending to ensure that their courses are properly wrapped up. Precariously employed academic staff are facing growing levels of insecurity as universities move online and cancel some spring and summer course offerings. Racialized students, faculty, and academic librarians are also experiencing heightened levels of xenophobia and racism as a direct result of this pandemic.

Implications for the fall semester

As conversations around planning for the fall semester begin on campuses across the province, many are signalling a continuation of remote work into the 2020-21 academic year. Adding to this discussion is the concern about drops in enrolment numbers and possible forthcoming funding cuts, similar to what was recently mandated in Manitoba. These factors and the way universities respond to them may threaten the job security of several different precarious employee groups on campus, including contract faculty, and provide for measures such as freezes on hiring.

The potential shift to remote teaching and use of online platforms for courses in the fall would require faculty to do additional work to create an effective learning environment for students and maintain the integrity of their courses.

For contract faculty, some of whom would be teaching multiple courses over the summer months and/or receiving contracts for fall courses towards the end of the summer, many will encounter challenges in allocating the time and effort needed to prepare their courses for online delivery. In addition, contract faculty often do not have the same level of access to resources and equipment as their tenured colleagues.

With uncertainty around when daycares and schools will re-open, academic staff who are also parents of young and school-aged children may require additional support as they continue to manage their work and care responsibilities during the fall semester. These conditions will also impact the capacity of some faculty members to conduct research and publish during this time. Faculty associations are in a unique position to support members by requesting a pause of the tenure clock and by advocating for bridge funding from the employer.

Many faculty with disabilities are already facing barriers due to a lack of sufficient, designated central funding for accommodations and/or due to disability-related stigma in the workplace. As conversations within institutions about financial constraints begin in earnest, accommodations may be seen as a burden rather than a right. Without university administrations meaningfully working with faculty associations on these issues, it is likely that existing challenges will continue and possibly worsen with the full move to remote course delivery in the fall.

Consideration must also be made for racialized and Indigenous faculty whose courses may be cancelled due to the pedagogical barriers involved with moving the teaching online. Consultation with faculty who are experiencing these cuts is imperative to ensuring equity-seeking members are not further

disadvantaged during the fall semester. This is a vital reason why university administrations should not abandon collegial governance in face of this crisis.

The immediate workload and overload requirements for members delivering remote course instruction, or who are equally burdened by their service or research requirements, may also require workplace accommodations in order to maintain their households or the households of extended family. Members may not be aware of their right to request accommodations from the employer. Additionally, administrators may not be granting accommodation requests uniformly across divisions and departments, particularly for members who require accommodations for unanticipated family care.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the pandemic is creating accommodation challenges that could not have been anticipated prior to this crisis. The public health order for social distancing means that all non-urgent and non-COVID-19 medical care has ground to a halt. This makes it much more difficult for members seeking accommodation to secure medical documentation and can create unanticipated challenges for faculty who were on medical leave but are ready to return to the workplace. Those return to work protocols have become more complex than anyone could have anticipated. Special care must also be paid to ensuring academic staff's privacy is being protected and they are not required to disclose specific details related to their disability status in order to attain accommodation. Meeting these unanticipated challenges will draw on goodwill as well as ensuring that both unions and employers meet their legal burden of reasonableness in all accommodation situations.

Recommendations for government

The pandemic has exacerbated existing equity issues within Ontario's postsecondary institutions. It is critical that during this time of crisis we collectively support equity-seeking members to ensure these issues are not entrenched further.

- ▶ Extend paid sick leave for all workers in Ontario, including contract faculty. It is particularly crucial that all essential workers have paid sick leave so that those most vulnerable are able to return to the work force.
- ▶ Ensure that labour and human rights rulings during the pandemic take into account the pressures of childcare and the highly gendered nature of childcare.
- ▶ Lobby the federal government to include universities in the wage subsidy legislation.

Mental health impact of COVID-19 on academic staff

A global mental health crisis

While the primary concern during the COVID-19 pandemic is the physical health of our community and loved ones, public health experts are also warning of the health toll of the lockdown and social distancing measures enforced to curb the spread of the virus.

Much like the longstanding arbitration rule of “work now, grieve later,” the world is in the process of coping with the new reality of the virus and lockdown, while the long-term physical and mental health impacts of this pandemic are yet to be fully understood and addressed. Based on previous research, the outcomes are expected to be dire.

Health and economic uncertainties coupled with physical and social distancing measures have resulted in mental distress for many of our members. Needless to say, individuals with a history of mental illness and marginalized communities are most at risk. Unemployment, economic uncertainty, and precarity also have a direct impact on mental health and are exasperated during this period.

Research on economic depressions and recessions points to their negative implications on health, including mental health. Unemployment and recessions lead to decreased life spans and spikes in suicide. A recent Alberta study found that, for every 1 per cent increase in unemployment there is a 2.8 per cent increase in the province’s suicide rate. In Europe and the United States, suicide rates rise about 1 per cent for every 1 percentage point increase in unemployment. In addition, there have already been reports that lockdowns are triggering higher rates of domestic abuse and alcohol use.

Professionals have been warning of the mental health impacts of the pandemic, social isolation, and uncertainty about how long it will last. Sandro Galea, Dean at Boston University’s School of Public Health, studied the impacts of quarantine during the SARS epidemic in Toronto. She warns that mental illness will be “the next wave of this epidemic” and emphasizes the importance of de-stigmatizing mental illness.

What are the implications for the mental health of academic staff moving forward?

On university campuses, where mental health concerns had reached crisis level prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the imposed social distancing measures and sudden move to ERT have led to additional challenges for faculty, academic librarians, and students.

The impacts that shuttering campuses and moving to ERT will have on students and faculty mental health have yet to be fully understood, as the last few weeks have been ones of “survival,” and we are not at the evaluation stage yet. The long-term effects of these changes and social isolation will become much clearer in the coming weeks and months. As noted elsewhere, a pandemic holds a mirror up to a society and exploits its weaknesses. Ontario, like most jurisdictions, woefully underfunded mental

health supports prior to the crisis and this crisis has made those gaps even more apparent. The need for mental health support and treatment will only grow as we move through the various phases of the pandemic. Now is the time to start planning and implementing a comprehensive system that fosters mental health on and off campus.

Recommendations for government

- ▶ Health care professionals are warning of an 'echo' pandemic of mental health and it is critical that the infrastructure be in place on and off campus to support all Ontarians struggling with mental health challenges amidst the pandemic. The recently announced Mental Health and Addiction Research Centre of Excellence is a very good first step in developing a provincial plan for mental health supports. The introduction of a pilot program to support cognitive behavioural therapy for Ontarians is also a laudable initiative. However, the looming mental health crisis related to COVID 19 will require far more creative and aggressive action from government. We recommend that this is the moment to fold all mental health services into OHIP so that all Ontarians have access to the mental health care they need.

Collegial governance during the pandemic

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted governance at universities?

In the past few weeks, universities have had to take many unprecedented emergency measures and implement swift changes to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as institutions shift to making longer-term plans about their academic and operational activities for the summer and fall terms, they face challenging decisions about how to carry out the teaching and research that is core to their purpose.

Unfortunately, in navigating these challenging conditions, some administrations are foregoing their responsibility to respect the shared governance structures of their institutions and, instead, are making academic decisions without the involvement of senates and academic councils or proper consultation with faculty. These unilateral approaches have seen the voices of faculty ignored, undermining the collegial governance processes that are vital to the effective operations of Ontario's postsecondary institutions.

Any proposed shift to alternative modes of teaching and learning or to holding full semesters remotely raises many uncertainties, concerns, and challenges. University faculty who do the bulk of the research and teaching at our institutions need to be at the centre of conversations and decision-making processes about the shape of academic activity. Universities also need to consult student groups and ensure that student voices and experiences are heard and respected as decisions about their learning environment are being made. It is only through the collective wisdom and efforts of all members of the campus community that Ontario's universities will be able to chart a path forward that maintains the quality of education and research.

Universities' shared model of governance is meant to allow voices of campus community members to be heard and for decisions to be made through democratic, transparent, and accountable collegial processes. It is, therefore, very concerning that some administrations are undermining these principles by ignoring their obligation to follow the proper procedures and respect the long-standing decision-making structures of their institutions. Given the technological capacities universities use to allow ERT and remote meetings, there is no justification for excluding faculty voices by circumventing critical governing bodies and processes.

What is the path forward?

Universities have made decisions and solidified plans for the summer and fall terms largely without any meaningful consultation with faculty. A crisis is no time to abandon collegial governance, indeed if university administrators want the return to class in the fall to be a success it is vital that they pivot to a more collaborative approach. Respecting the foundational governance structures of Ontario universities is not just an exercise in democratic accountability, but the most effective way for universities to address the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As more information becomes available about future enrolment and university revenue, and as further decisions need to be made about course delivery, research, student support, and campus safety measures, administrations must engage with faculty through existing collegial governance structures to ensure that all decisions with academic implications are made by senates or equivalent bodies.

Recommendations for government

- ▶ Ensure that universities respect the bi-cameral collegial governance models in the Acts that govern Ontario universities.

Ontario university funding considerations

The public health challenges resulting from the pandemic have created historic levels of public sector spending to provide emergency income to Canadians. The federal government is providing over \$150 billion in aid and the federal deficit is expected to grow to over \$200 billion as a result.

In Ontario, the provincial government has also rolled out modest income supports. Given the gravity of the situation, these financial supports are vital, but they are also creating significant deficit levels. The province is spending up to \$20 billion to aid businesses and individuals affected by the pandemic and is projecting a \$21 billion deficit. These levels of public expenditure and debt have not been seen since World War II.

As a result of perennial revenue shortfalls, provincial finances were already in a challenging state when the crisis hit. As OCUFA and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives have regularly pointed out, tax cuts for the wealthiest Ontarians and regressive tax credits left the province very vulnerable.

To provide short-term relief to Ontario universities, Minister of Finance Rod Phillips committed to the June 30th funding allocation during his March fiscal update. The province also allocated \$15 million in emergency funding to support campuses in the abrupt move to remote teaching. However, the terms of that fund are less than clear and the government has not been transparent about the criteria. The provincial budget, set to be released in November, may contain further spending measures to stimulate the economy; however, there is a possibility that a period of difficult austerity will follow these spending measures.

What are the financial considerations for the 2020-21 semester?

The immediate financial constraint facing universities in the fall is the declining enrolment of international students as a result of the public health directives on international travel. Some institutions are projecting a drop of up to 75 per cent of new enrolments. Conversely, enrolment of domestic students should remain steady if not increase.

Not all postsecondary institutions will experience this loss evenly. The impact of lost tuition for Ontario universities may be less than for colleges.² For universities, international tuition fees represented nearly 20 per cent of total operating revenues in aggregate in 2018-19, the latest year for which there are publicly available data. For universities receiving Ministry of Colleges and Universities funding directly, the level of reliance on international tuition ranges from one per cent to nearly a third. For affiliated and federated institutions, the range is between zero and more than one third of operating revenues.

Different institutions adopt different strategies, but they do so in the context of government policy: the pre-existing condition for institutional vulnerability is provincial funding and policy. It starts with a more or less continuous decline in provincial inflation-adjusted per-student operating funding to universities,

2 International tuition fees accounted for 60 per cent of total tuition revenue for colleges in 2019-20; Ontario Financial Accountability Office, *Ontario Service Fees in 2019-20*.

the deregulation of some tuition, notably international student tuition, and permissive inflation of other tuition. The inevitable consequence is that universities became more reliant on tuition for operating funds than for provincial operating support. With the decline and deprecation of a funding model designed to maintain predictable revenues in the spite of enrolment swings, universities are now at the mercy of unpredictable shifts in enrolment, like the one expected in the wake of the pandemic.

Universities' susceptibility has been compounded by governments' (provincial and federal) strategy to increase international student enrolment, without corresponding support. Ontario Budget 2010 announced a target of a 50 per cent increase in international student enrolment at Ontario universities and colleges. Full-time international student enrolment at Ontario universities reached that target by 2014-15. As of 2018-19, full-time international student enrolment had more than doubled since 2010-11. Over the same period, international tuition fees for undergraduates rose an average of eight per cent per year, for graduate students an annual average of five per cent. Provincially the proportion of operating funding accounted for by international tuition in 2018-19 is almost three times greater than it was in 2010-11 (the first year Ontario universities started reporting tuition paid by domestic and international students separately).

Except for an average increase of nine per cent in international undergraduate fees and an average of six per cent for international graduate tuition, it is unknown what the level of universities' dependence is on international tuition in 2019-20. Still less is known about what will occur in the coming year. To date, universities are proposing to increase international student fees for 2020-21 at rates well above inflation.³ At present, few budget proposals include enrolment forecasts that venture to estimate the effect on international student enrolment. For example, McMaster University's budget projects a decline in international student enrolment while Windsor University's budget anticipates a reduction of 11 per cent in total tuition revenue based on a 20 per cent decline in graduate student enrolment.

Though we do not have tuition data for 2019-20, we can illustrate the effect of decreased tuition based on 2018-19 numbers. Table 1 demonstrates the increase in the proportion of revenues represented by international tuition from 2010-11 to 2018-19 (before the domestic tuition reduction), the 2018-19 proportion of revenue accounted by international student fees (as if the 10 per cent domestic tuition reduction had occurred), and projected declines in operating funds and combined operating, research and trust/special purpose funds.

3 Based on available proposed tuition schedules, the trend is to increase international undergraduate tuition for first year as much as 12 per cent, for upper years ~5 per cent. For graduate programs, the range is from zero per cent to 10 per cent, depending on program and university.

Impact of declining international tuition fees on university budgets

Revenue	General expendable (operating)				Operating/Research/Special purpose			
	Dependence		If decline of:		Dependence		If decline of:	
	Since	%	20%	50%	Since	%	20%	50%
	2010-11	2018-19			2010-11	2018-19		
Provincial	2.8	19.9%	4.0%	10.0%	2.9	14.6%	2.9%	7.3%
Algoma	3.5	14.0%	2.8%	7.0%	3.5	13.3%	2.7%	6.6%
Brescia	2.4	21.8%	4.4%	10.9%	2.4	21.8%	4.4%	10.9%
Brock	2.8	17.6%	3.5%	8.8%	2.8	16.5%	3.3%	8.3%
Carleton	1.7	19.6%	3.9%	9.8%	1.7	16.4%	3.3%	8.2%
Guelph	2.4	6.8%	1.4%	3.4%	2.6	4.5%	0.9%	2.3%
Huron	3.0	29.4%	5.9%	14.7%	3.0	29.4%	5.9%	14.7%
King's	2.4	35.6%	7.1%	17.8%	2.4	35.3%	7.1%	17.7%
Lakehead	13.1	18.2%	3.6%	9.1%	13.6	15.2%	3.0%	7.6%
Laurentian	1.6	6.9%	1.4%	3.4%	1.5	5.1%	1.0%	2.6%
McMaster	2.6	13.6%	2.7%	6.8%	2.8	8.4%	1.7%	4.2%
Nipissing	2.9	0.9%	0.2%	0.4%	2.8	0.8%	0.2%	0.4%
NOSM	0.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
OCAD	4.0	20.1%	4.0%	10.1%	4.2	19.0%	3.8%	9.5%
Ottawa	3.8	16.5%	3.3%	8.2%	3.7	10.6%	2.1%	5.3%
Queen's	3.6	12.9%	2.6%	6.5%	3.8	8.6%	1.7%	4.3%
Renison	1.7	2.8%	0.6%	1.4%	1.7	2.8%	0.6%	1.4%
Ryerson	2.8	8.0%	1.6%	4.0%	2.7	7.0%	1.4%	3.5%
Saint-Paul	1.7	11.0%	2.2%	5.5%	1.8	10.5%	2.1%	5.3%
St. Jerome's	0.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
St. Michael's	0.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Toronto	2.9	32.6%	6.5%	16.3%	3.2	21.9%	4.4%	10.9%
Trent	1.3	10.3%	2.1%	5.1%	1.4	9.2%	1.8%	4.6%
UOIT	2.1	6.9%	1.4%	3.5%	2.1	6.2%	1.2%	3.1%
Waterloo	2.3	27.9%	5.6%	13.9%	2.3	20.3%	4.1%	10.1%
Western	2.5	15.8%	3.2%	7.9%	2.6	10.9%	2.2%	5.4%
Wilfrid Laurier	3.6	8.5%	1.7%	4.2%	3.6	7.6%	1.5%	3.8%
Windsor	2.8	26.3%	5.3%	13.1%	2.9	23.0%	4.6%	11.5%
York	3.1	22.0%	4.4%	11.0%	3.0	19.6%	3.9%	9.8%

Over the coming 6–18 months, government funding for the postsecondary sector may be cut and universities may not have the same access to international tuition fees due to the pandemic. OCUFA's focus will be to demand universities draw on their financial reserves to ensure no or minimal layoffs.

Recommendations for government

- ▶ The SMA3 agreements and metrics should be cancelled and not just delayed. The metrics are a useless and potentially destructive distraction from the important work universities must do coming out of the pandemic.
- ▶ Provide bridge funding to Ontario universities to backfill some of the revenue loss of enrolment dips from international students. Given that the provincial government made it explicit policy to recruit international students as a replacement for public funding, it is imperative that the government address this looming crisis.
- ▶ Develop a sustainable funding formula moving forward that properly funds Ontario universities and ensures that Ontario is no longer last in the country in per student and per capita funding.
- ▶ Lobby the federal government to restore the deep cuts to the Canada Health and Social transfer made in the 1990's.

Remote teaching and online learning

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted mode of delivery for courses?

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of university and college campuses, institutions had to make difficult and immediate decisions about how the winter term was to be completed. Most universities opted for ERT options to deliver the final weeks of classes through online video conferencing platforms and recorded lectures offered on learning platforms.

ERT and student evaluations

OCUFA's Working Group on Student Questionnaires on Courses and Teaching (SQCTs) has shown that SQCT results are skewed by factors outside faculty control and endemic bias, and that SQCTs contribute to systemic discrimination, facilitate harassment, and compromise educational quality. In addition, online SQCTs have a notoriously low response rates, further compromising their validity and increasing the risk of compounding already existing biases. In light of the findings of the working group, it is imperative that teaching evaluations not be used to assess ERT.

Recommendations for government

As universities begin to make decisions about course delivery methods for the summer and fall terms, faculty must be properly consulted and included in decision-making processes. Universities also need to:

- ▶ Ensure that the Ontario Health and Safety Act is adhered to during ERT and work-from-home arrangements. Health and safety committees at Ontario universities must be integral to any return to operations during the summer and fall terms. In addition, any plans for the upcoming term must take into account that 11% of OCUFA's membership is over the age of 65.
- ▶ Expand the existing fund to assist universities with the increased costs of ERT.
- ▶ Ensure that contract faculty have access to the necessary equipment to engage in ERT.
- ▶ Respect and protect the intellectual property of faculty members for course content offered through ERT.
- ▶ Consider accessibility and accommodation concerns for faculty, academic librarians, and students – particularly those with care responsibilities, limited access to computers, and the internet.

eCampusOntario and remote teaching

What is eCampusOntario?

eCampus Ontario defines itself as “a not-for-profit corporation, funded by the Government of Ontario to be a centre of excellence in online and technology-enabled learning for all publicly funded colleges and universities in Ontario.” At one point, eCampus Ontario was an enthusiastic proponent of online learning and was the vehicle used by then Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne to push colleges and universities to expand online learning opportunities.

eCampusOntario was launched by the Ontario government in 2015 with a budget of \$72 million over five years. It was an initiative of the Ontario Online Learning Consortium (OOLC), [a web portal](#) where students could find online courses offered by colleges and universities across the province. The OOLC (which no longer exists) was funded by the government and jointly administered by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and Colleges Ontario (CO).

OCUFA's previous advocacy on eCampusOntario

In the last few years, OCUFA has worked with the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario (CFS-O) and the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) to request student and faculty representation on the OOLC Board of Directors.

OCUFA also worked alongside CFS-O and OUSA to advocate for online access to free educational resources like textbooks and other course materials. In the summer of 2017, eCampusOntario launched the [Open Textbook Library](#), which was adapted from the BCcampus model used in British Columbia. The library acts as a repository of Open Educational Resources (OERs) from a range of disciplines that are available for use by students and educators at no cost, including for use as course materials.

In response, OCUFA conducted a survey to gauge faculty interest in eCampusOntario's new Open Textbook Library. Many professors expressed an interest in using OERs in their courses, but found the available offerings were not adequate. Either no textbooks were available for their field or the ones that were available did not adequately meet their teaching needs. Other faculty noted that they were interested in contributing to the writing of new textbooks relevant to their courses, but that current policies at their institutions did not recognize that work as research or service to the university.

Recent eCampusOntario proctoring service agreement

The move to ERT has also increased the relevance and visibility of eCampusOntario, leading some faculty to believe there would be a renewed push to move more courses online permanently.

On March 31st, the Ontario government announced an agreement with eCampusOntario that will provide postsecondary institutions with technology to conduct year-end exams and assessments. The automated, artificial intelligence-assisted online proctoring will be provided through [Proctortrack](#), a

private, US-based, for-profit company, and will be provided on an opt-in basis to Ontario's 44 public colleges and universities.

Concerns regarding the use of Proctortrack

There are some significant concerns regarding privacy and security issues given that the software would require sensitive personal data from students to verify their identity. When asked about these concerns, eCampus Ontario noted that they have included several security measures in their contract with Proctortrack and that data from Canadian institutions would be stored in Canadian cloud storage. They emphasized that, ultimately, it is the obligation of institutions to ensure their usual privacy and security protocols are followed.

In April, York University students raised concerns over the Liberal Arts and Professional Students Faculty's decision to use Proctortrack, prompting the faculty to reverse its decision and cancel its use of Proctortrack.

Students raised concerns about data privacy, especially since Proctortrack collects a wide range of students' personal data – including copies of government-issued ID and biometric data, such as scans of hands, knuckles, faces, and keystroke patterns – putting students at risk for data breaches and identity theft. The software also requires students to have a webcam and microphone recording them.

In explaining its decision to use the software, York acknowledged that some students may not have access to the requirements to use this service (a computer, webcam, and microphone). The administration asked students to arrange to borrow a laptop from the university's IT Helpdesk even as public health officials repeatedly asked everyone to shelter in place, putting students at risk.

In an email to students, York University confirmed Proctortrack has been vetted by the University's Counsel, Privacy, and Information Offices. The email also noted that any data retained by Proctortrack will be "securely stored on Canadian servers in compliance with Canadian privacy legislation."

Several days later, the administration wrote students an email apologizing that students' personal information submitted to Proctor has been stored on a US-based server due to a "configuration error," and that the university is in the process of retrieving and purging the data in question.

After significant student pushback, including a petition signed by over 1,200 students, the Liberal Arts and Professional Students Faculty decided to discontinue its use of Proctortrack. That was later followed by York University discontinuing use of the software entirely.

While ensuring exam integrity is important during this period of emergency remote teaching, using problematic software with substantial privacy concerns is not the only solution. Institutions can explore other options that provide information privacy, including employing teaching assistants to proctor exams of a limited number of students online.

Recommendations for government

Given the security concerns with Proctortrack, OCUFA recommends that:

- ▶ eCampusOntario should only be involved in providing voluntary assistance in relation to emergency remote teaching and not facilitating any to move to ongoing remote teaching after the pandemic.
- ▶ eCampusOntario should make publicly available copies of the security and privacy-related documents provided by Proctortrack.
- ▶ Ontario universities must provide or fund any technology upgrades students require to use Proctortrack.

The impacts of COVID-19 on students

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students at Ontario universities were already stretched thin and asked to bear the brunt of astronomical tuition fees, eroding public funding, and dwindling student aid.

Last year alone, the Ontario government cut over \$671 million from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and changed the eligibility criteria. This cut largely negated any benefits from the simultaneous 10 per cent tuition fee cut and has left students even more disadvantaged and with increasing debt levels.

These changes are, by definition, regressive because those most adversely affected are those already forced to borrow for their education. They have made postsecondary education less accessible for students in Ontario, especially for low and middle-income students.

Undergraduate tuition fee levels in Ontario are an astounding 58 per cent higher than the average for the rest of Canada. Ontario's undergraduate international tuition fees have increased by 100 per cent over the last decade, resulting in the province having the highest level of tuition fees in the country (\$38,276 at the undergraduate and \$23,770 at the graduate levels).

In addition, as of 2016-17, tuition fees surpassed public funding as the single largest source of university revenue. Currently, 55 per cent of Ontario universities' operating income is provided through student fees. This figure was only 20 per cent in 1990, demonstrating the increasing reliance on user fees and the gutting of the public funds provided to universities over the past three decades.

Needless to say, the problems with this flawed policy have been pushed to the forefront of the debate on campuses in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

While students are still required to pay for their summer tuition fees, many have lost employment and access to the summer jobs they were relying on to pay for their school and living expenses. Campus and residence closures have adversely impacted international students and those without alternative housing options. In addition, the move to ERT has proven challenging and inaccessible for many Indigenous students on reservations, students with care responsibilities, and those from low income households.

The pandemic has also created particular challenges for graduate students. With campus facilities closing and restricted access to laboratories and libraries, many graduate students are struggling to meet their research and academic requirements. At the same time, with course and tutorial cancellations, many graduate students are feeling the financial burden of losing their employment opportunities as teaching and research assistants. The ability of parents to work, complete courses, and finish teaching or research assignments has also been compromised by daycare and school closures. As a result, student groups are advocating for an immediate tuition waiver for the spring and summer terms for all graduate students who have to remain registered, as well as extensions to time to completion timelines and scholarships, including Tri-Council grants. The OCUFA Executive

has expressed its full support of the graduate students' demand by signing onto a letter written by the National and Ontario Graduate Caucuses of Canadian Federation of Students.

Recommendations for government

- ▶ Abandon the politically motivated Student Choice Initiative. Students need vibrant, well resourced student unions now more than ever.
- ▶ Provide a tuition waiver to all graduate students for the summer term.
- ▶ Reintroduce non-repayable grants for low-income students.
- ▶ Extend eligibility for OSAP to part time students in recognition of the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Conclusion

Like many Ontarians, the COVID-19 crisis has imposed additional hardship, loss and uncertainty on faculty in Ontario. It has also magnified the scale of existing challenges on our campuses and communities. Many Ontarians have lost their jobs and many more fear the financial and health challenges that lie ahead. Friends and neighbours have lost loved ones. Most experts concur that we are only in the first phase of this pandemic. Many challenges lay ahead for Ontarians, including faculty.

Despite the difficult times we are living through, this pandemic presents numerous opportunities to focus on what matters most and correct the mistakes of the past. The enduring lesson thus far is how interconnected we all are locally, nationally, and globally. Universities, at their best, have always understood that interconnectedness. Academic staff have a vital role to play in maintaining the teaching and learning process during these difficult times, and in the economic revival once the crisis passes. We hope the government does not ignore this historic opportunity to renew Ontario's universities as the province heals and recovers from this crisis.