

Frequently Asked Questions

**Ontario's Differentiation Agenda and
Program Prioritization**

OCUFA

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

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the Differentiation Agenda?

The Differentiation Agenda encompasses several initiatives undertaken by the Government of Ontario. The goal of these policies is to produce a more “differentiated” university system, or a system in which each university has a distinct mission, program focus, and enrolment mix. The government argues that such a system will be more efficient by avoiding duplication and rationalizing operations.

The primary motivation for the Differentiation Agenda is the perceived need to constrain operating costs. The government has signaled that significant new funding for universities will not be available, due to the large provincial deficit and the government’s long-term fiscal goals. At the same time, Ontario’s universities are an increasingly important part of the government’s economic development strategy. The differentiation initiatives are therefore an attempt to balance the need to preserve strong universities within a constrained funding environment.

The Differentiation Agenda has three primary components:

a. Differentiation Policy Framework

On November 29, 2013, MTCU released the final version of its “Differentiation Policy Framework.” This document – which is substantively similar to the version that was leaked in September 2013 and eventually made public on the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) website – outlines the principles, components, and proposed metrics that will guide the Ministry’s differentiation push. There are eight components (such as “Teaching and Learning” and “Program Offerings”) each with an associated set of metrics. The document is deliberately high-level, with little information on how the components and metrics are to be used. In conversations with senior MTCU staff, it seems that the framework is intended to provide a “vocabulary” for institutions to construct their Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs). Institutions will be asked to speak to the components, and justify their strategic goals according to their performance on the highlighted metrics.

The framework also signals that MTCU will be looking to change the funding formula to reflect the principles and components laid out in the policy. This process is in very early stages, but has the potential to have a significant effect on university education in Ontario. OCUFA will be monitoring developments in this area closely, and working with government to ensure they understand faculty concerns.

b. Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs)

SMAs are the primary vehicles for implementing the Government’s differentiation goals. In drafting its SMA, each institution was asked to define its unique strategic mission, and articulate how it plans to promote this mission going forward. Institutions were required to submit their SMA proposals in 2012, and these were reviewed by a committee appointed by

the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Evidently unhappy with the proposals received, the government has been working with institutions to refine these agreements by early 2014. Paul Genest, former head of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), has been tasked with “re-negotiating” SMAs to bring them more in line with the government’s goals.

c. The Productivity and Innovation Fund

This modest fund – worth \$47.5 million - was established to fund institutional programs that a) develop back office efficiencies, b) pursue course re-design initiatives, and c) undertake a program prioritization process on campus. In November 2013, 88 institutional and 31 multi-institutional programs received funding through this program. Of these, at least 11, and possibly 12, appear to be program prioritization processes.

2. What are the problems with the Differentiation Agenda?

While it is too early to assess the policy consequences of the Differentiation Agenda, OCUFA has some significant concerns:

- a. *Differentiation could pose a threat to institutional autonomy and academic freedom.* A potential consequence of the drive to greater “differentiation” would be the government’s intrusion into academic planning, traditionally – and properly – the purview of faculty and academic senates.
- b. *Ontario’s universities are already differentiated.* Currently, Ontario’s university sector features a diversity of unique missions and programs. Some institutions focus on serving Northern communities. Others deliver bilingual higher education. Many institutions focus on particular programs, such as science and engineering or art and design. We are concerned that the differentiation framework is therefore an unnecessary intrusion into institutional academic planning. Or, in other words, a solution in search of a problem.
- c. *Differentiation can harm access and choice.* Right now, students have access to comprehensive university programming across the province. We are worried that if differentiation alters this programming mix, students across the province – and especially those in rural or Northern areas – may have difficulty accessing their program of choice.
- d. *Politicizing funding and impairing long-term planning.* The government has signaled its intent to align the university funding formula with the Differentiation Agenda. This could lead to the development of outcome-based funding measures, which hurt students at supposedly under-performing institutions and make continuous improvement in the sector difficult. A new funding formula could also allow the government to direct funding according to its own priorities, which would be by necessity short-term and political. The current formula uses an objective distribution mechanism, and this will be important to preserve going forward.

- e. *Imposing homogeneity under the banner of differentiation.* By confining differentiation to eight standardized “components”, the government is essentially forcing institutions to be different in exactly the same ways. This sort of paradox is inherent to top-down, standardized differentiation exercises, and we are concerned that this policy will stamp out *true* differentiation in the name of standardized metrics and a limited government vision for diversity.

3. What is Program Prioritization?

Program prioritization refers to an administrative process to rank all university programs and services according to a set of criteria, and then to make resource allocation decisions based on those rankings. The intent is to identify high- and low-performing programs, and to eliminate or cut funding for under-performers and divert resources to higher ranked areas.

Program prioritization processes are usually – but not always – informed by the writings of Robert Dickeson, an American-based consultant.

Program prioritization will usually contain the following:

- a. The creation of a task force or working groups to rank programs;
- b. Ranking is extended to all programs and services, both academic and administrative;
- c. The working groups rank each program according to a large number of criteria;
- d. Programs are put into “quintiles” according to their ranking; and
- e. Programs in lower quintiles are usually marked for cutbacks or elimination.

The University of Guelph is the only university to have completed this process. Prioritization is underway at York and Wilfrid Laurier. At Brock, action by the faculty association forced the re-assignment of the academic program review process to the Senate, away from the President’s office. Algoma, Carleton, Nipissing, OCADU, Ottawa, Ryerson, Trent, and UOIT have received funding for program prioritization, and are expected to begin soon.

4. What are the problems with Program Prioritization?

Program prioritization has the potential to severely harm universities where it is implemented. The major concerns are:

- a. It undermines the authority of academic senates, and gives academic decision-making power to central administrators.
- b. It is based on a flawed and complicated methodology:
 - i. The working groups are asked to rank programs according to hundreds of data points, which creates the possibility of serious errors and promotes subjective judgments.
 - ii. Rankers are asked to evaluate programs they may know nothing about.

- iii. The comparisons are absurd. The logic of program prioritization leads to comparisons between bookstores and Physics programs, English departments with postage and mail services. This is apples and oranges at its very worst.
- c. Program prioritization often leads to cutbacks and program eliminations, which in turn may lead to layoffs and loss of permanent faculty positions.
- d. In extreme cases, program prioritization can be used to completely change the mission and purpose of an institution.

5. Who is Robert Dickeson?

Robert Dickeson is an American consultant. Through his firm Academic Strategic Partners, he is one of the chief proponents of program prioritization. His book, *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance*, lays out the principles and practice of his prioritization process.

Dickeson was president of the University of Northern Colorado from 1981-1991. He gained notoriety for weeding out tenured faculty at the institution (which prompted an investigation and censure by the American Association of University Professors). Since then, he has had senior roles with several private organizations working in enrolment management and student financial aid.

6. Are the Differentiation Agenda and Program Prioritization connected?

Yes. Program prioritization is one element of the Differentiation Agenda. The government, as part of its broader goal to “differentiate” Ontario’s universities, is encouraging institutions to undertake a program prioritization process by providing funding for these projects through the Productivity and Innovation Fund. This appears to be an attempt to incentivize universities to rationalize and downsize their operations in order to constrain the need for new public funding.

Several universities – such as Wilfrid Laurier and Guelph – undertook program prioritization prior to the release of the Differentiation Policy Framework and the creation of the Productivity and Innovation Fund. This suggests that program prioritization also serves the needs of some local administrations. This is an example of a time where administrative interests and government policy initiatives intersect.

7. Do universities have to undertake a Program Prioritization Process?

No. Program prioritization is being encouraged by government through the Productivity and Innovation fund, but is not mandatory. Ontario’s larger universities – such as the University of Toronto and Western University – have demonstrated little interest in program prioritization.

8. How can faculty associations respond to Program Prioritization?

Program prioritization will vary from campus to campus. Governance and collective agreements are also different, so tactics will need to be developed according to the particular context. OCUFA has resources and expertise to help you craft your response. From media relations to the bargaining table, we are here to help.

Generally, there are two paths for confronting program prioritization on your campus:

a. The Senate.

Academic decision-making usually rests with the Senate, and program prioritization is an abrogation of this authority. Senates can therefore be mobilized to block program prioritization. If this is unsuccessful, legal options exist. Usurping the authority of the Senate will typically represent a violation of the university's legal charter, creating the potential for a court challenge.

b. Collective Agreements.

Many collective agreements contain language protecting faculty members from termination, provided there is no clear case for financial exigency. The agreement can therefore be used to protect individuals from the effects of program cuts or closures.

In many cases, program prioritization is used as a pretense to re-organize the university, change its mission, and alter its governance structure. Each of these will require a change to existing collective agreements, and can therefore be resisted using the grievance process. Violation of the collective agreement – or attempts to unilaterally change it – can be met with strong legal and job action.

9. How can OCUFA help local associations against Program Prioritization?

OCUFA provides a variety of services and resources that will be useful in responding to program prioritization:

- A forum for faculty facing program prioritization to share information and coordinate activities, including regular conference calls between affected associations.
- Research and analysis to support strong pushback strategies.
- Support for crafting effective media messages and working with media.
- Support in using bargaining, grievance, or legal mechanisms to block program prioritization.

10. How is OCUFA pushing back against the Differentiation Agenda?

OCUFA is working at the provincial level to challenge the differentiation framework. Particular activities include:

- a. Writing a research paper to provide context around differentiation and program prioritization.
- b. Meeting with sympathetic MPPs to raise concerns in caucus and the legislature. In particular, we will be collaborating with MPPs from rural and Northern ridings, as their institutions have the most to lose in the differentiation agenda.
- c. Creating a Strategic Communications Plan with province-wide messaging and tactics.
- d. Working with our partners in the Ontario University and College Coalition – a group of students, staff, and faculty – to coordinate our response.
- e. Providing dedicated support to local associations faced with a prioritization process.