

2012 OCUFA Faculty Survey

**Part 2 – Faculty views on proposed changes to
undergraduate education**

OCUFA

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

INTRODUCTION

Ontario's professors and academic librarians are on the front lines of Ontario's universities. They are uniquely positioned to assess the performance of the sector, and to evaluate the ways in which proposed reforms may impact their institutions and their work.

In early 2012, Ontario-based education media began reporting that the Government of Ontario was entertaining a number of significant changes to the structure, academic content, and program delivery methods of universities. Some of these reported changes were introduced in a leaked discussion paper titled *3x3: Revolutionizing Ontario's Post-Secondary Education System for the 21st Century*. Key proposals within this report include:

- Change undergraduate degrees from four years to three years. This change was not contemplated as a compressed degree with the same content being delivered over a shorter period but rather as a restructuring of undergraduate programs that would reduce the overall program content with one less year of instruction.
- Require all undergraduate programs to deliver 60 per cent of programs through online methods.
- Move to a 'year-round' or three-semester model of university programming.

The leaked paper contained no discussion of the potential implications for students or of the impact on academic program quality that would result from these major policy shifts.

To gauge faculty opinion of these proposals, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) undertook a survey of its members across the province.

The survey was conducted online between March 21, 2012 and April 16, 2012. Responses to the questionnaire were received from over 2,300 faculty members, for a total 2,015 complete responses from professors and academic librarians from all Ontario universities and a full range of disciplines.

The following report presents the survey findings and provides additional commentary about key results.

FACULTY VIEWS ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

In light of the proposed changes and the serious implications for students and program quality, faculty were surveyed to provide an important and, to date, unsolicited viewpoint on these policy matters.

Question 1

The Government of Ontario has proposed that the length of an undergraduate degree be reduced to three years from the current four-year degree. In my opinion, this change will harm the quality of the university education in Ontario.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		69%	1505
b. Agree		17%	363
c. Neither agree or disagree		6%	140
d. Disagree		4%	84
e. Strongly disagree		3%	55
f. Don't know		2%	35
Total Responses			2182

Surveyed faculty are overwhelmingly (86%) concerned that a move to three-year degrees will erode academic quality.

Question 2

In my opinion, the move to a three-year degree will limit the ability of students to pursue graduate or professional education in the rest of Canada and the United States.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		67%	1469
b. Agree		20%	431
c. Neither agree or disagree		5%	119
d. Disagree		4%	94
e. Strongly disagree		1%	22
f. Don't know		3%	60
Total Responses			2195

With 87% of surveyed faculty members indicating that a three year degree will hurt student mobility, this is a clear warning to Government that such a policy will hurt the opportunities available to students. The vast majority of Ontario undergraduates who pursue graduate and professional programs do so in Canada and the United States, with a smaller proportion go to Europe (where three year degrees are the norm) and other locations. The leaked report acknowledges this problem, but does not propose any solutions.

Question 3

The Government of Ontario has proposed that universities offer three full semesters per year. In my experience, there is insufficient student demand to justify year-round university.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		27%	587
b. Agree		22%	487
c. Neither agree or disagree		18%	385
d. Disagree		18%	385
e. Strongly disagree		6%	141
f. Don't know		9%	207
Total Responses			2192

Almost half (49%) of surveyed faculty question whether there is enough student demand to warrant moving to year-round university education.

Question 4

The Government of Ontario is proposing that 60 per cent of undergraduate courses should be delivered online. In my opinion, greater use of online education will harm the quality of education that students receive.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		60%	1313
b. Agree		22%	480
c. Neither agree or disagree		8%	165
d. Disagree		6%	133
e. Strongly disagree		4%	82
f. Don't know		1%	22
Total Responses			2195

Surveyed faculty members are clearly skeptical of the online education proposal, with 82% expressing concern about a move to deliver 60 per cent of undergraduate courses in the digital space. It is important to note that this finding does not question the quality of online delivery when appropriately balanced with other classroom, laboratory, seminar, or studio engagement. What is likely of concern is the arbitrary choice of 60 per cent without any assessment of impact across all programs or disciplines.

Question 5

In my opinion, online education is an effective substitute for the traditional classroom experience.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		2%	47
b. Agree		6%	129
c. Neither agree or disagree		11%	245
d. Disagree		30%	653
e. Strongly disagree		50%	1094
f. Don't know		1%	28
Total Responses			2196

The majority of surveyed faculty members (80%) question the value of online education as an effective substitution for classroom learning.

Question 6

In my opinion, the Ontario government should play a more active role in determining how much teaching and research is done by university faculty.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		3%	68
b. Agree		6%	140
c. Neither agree or disagree		9%	189
d. Disagree		24%	534
e. Strongly disagree		56%	1227
f. Don't know		2%	39
Total Responses			2197

A move by the Government of Ontario to be interventionist in determining the levels of teaching and research done by university faculty is clearly of concern to surveyed faculty (80%).

Question 7

In my opinion, instruction by faculty who are active in research is an important part of university education.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
a. Strongly agree		64%	1409
b. Agree		27%	594
c. Neither agree or disagree		5%	113
d. Disagree		3%	57
e. Strongly disagree		1%	22
f. Don't know		0%	5
Total Responses			2200

The majority of surveyed faculty members overwhelmingly (91%) believe that teaching and research cannot be delinked without risk to academic quality. Several recent commentators with government and media sectors have sought to downplay the importance of faculty research as a contributing factor to the overall quality of programs and student learning. This position is at odds with the values of faculty in Ontario.

CONCLUSION

Ontario's professors and academic librarians are clearly skeptical about some of the reforms floated by the Government of Ontario and other policy entrepreneurs working within the sector. Faculty members believe that the three-year degree proposal will hurt educational quality and limit student opportunities. They also think that delivering a majority of a university degree online will damage student outcomes. Online education is valued by professors, but it is no substitute for face-to-face learning within a classroom environment.

It is OCUFA's hope that these views will be taken into consideration by the Government of Ontario as they examine the need for, and shape of, reform at Ontario's Universities.