



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

## **Analysis: 2011 Ontario Election Party Platforms**

### **September 21, 2011**

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#### *Introduction: The Appropriate Platform*

Higher education has become a significant issue in the 2011 Election Campaign, competing for attention with the economy, job creation, and healthcare on the policy agenda. This is due to a variety of factors. First, the citizens of Ontario are concerned with the accessibility and affordability of the university system. Recent OCUFA polling indicates that, when primed, Ontarians list “affordability of PSE” just behind “quality of health care” as the second most important issue facing the province, ahead of unemployment and reducing taxes.<sup>1</sup> As a result, all parties have introduced some form of financial relief for students.

Second, the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, the Ontario New Democratic Party, and the Green Party of Ontario are all responding to the Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty positioning himself as the ‘Education Premier’. The opposition parties must pay attention to higher education to prevent the Liberal Party from controlling the agenda on this important issue.

Finally, the university system is important to the economic and social development of Ontario. Any political party interested in growing the economy and improving the job prospects of Ontarians – and they are all concerned with this, for both idealistic and practical reasons – must have an effective set of higher education policies. Considering these factors, it is no surprise that each party has put an emphasis on higher education within their announced platforms.

But are these policies appropriate to the needs of higher education in Ontario? To answer this question, it is important to clarify the policy outcomes that are desirable in the provincial context. In order to ensure a high quality, accessible and affordable university system, the ideal platform would:

- Provide funding to accommodate projected enrolment growth;
- Increase the per-student funding level to allow universities to make needed quality enhancements. This would include renewal of aging infrastructure, improvements to university libraries, and the hiring of new full-time professors and academic librarians;
- Introduce measures to control the cost of higher education for students; and
- Protect the collective bargaining rights of faculty and faculty associations across Ontario.

Each of the party platforms will be evaluated according to these desirable policies.

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<sup>1</sup> *The 2011 OCUFA/CFS Study on Post-Secondary Education: Ontario Results*. The results of this study are based on a poll of 1800 Ontarians over the age of 18 conducted between January 5 and 14, 2011. The margin of error for a sample of this size is +/- 2.9 percentage points within a confidence interval of 95%.

### *Funding enrolment growth*

The Liberal Party of Ontario, Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, and the Ontario New Democratic Party have all committed to funding 60,000 new spaces at Ontario's universities and colleges by 2013-14. However, it should be noted that this funding was announced in the 2011 Ontario Budget, so the Liberals, PCs, and ONDP are simply continuing this previous policy.

The Green Party of Ontario platform does not contain a specific reference to funding for enrolment growth.

### *Increasing per-student funding*

While funding for growth is important, it is also necessary to increase the per-student funding level in order to ensure universities are able to provide a quality education. Since 1990, the per-student funding level in Ontario has declined by 25 per cent, and is now the lowest in Canada. Bringing in new students at this inadequate per-student funding level puts additional pressure on institutions, and may lead to larger student-to-faculty ratios, larger class sizes, and an unmanageable infrastructure debt. At present, Ontario has the worst student-to-faculty ratio in Canada, at 27-to-1.

Of all the provincial parties, only the Green Party has promised to increase funding for universities, funded through a postponement of pending corporate tax cuts. However, it is not clear if this funding increase will be pegged to the per-student funding figure, or at what level they wish to set the per-student amount.

The absence of increased per-student funding from the Liberal, PC and ONDP platforms is worrisome, as it indicates a lack of awareness among these parties of the need for increased funding within the university sector. Even with funding for additional student spaces, this status quo approach will tend to exacerbate existing quality concerns within the university system.

### *Controlling the cost of higher education*

Tuition fees in Ontario are the highest in Canada. This has many citizens justifiably concerned about the affordability of higher education in the province. The OCUFA Poll found that 66 per cent of all Ontarians – and 87 per cent of Ontarians aged 18-24 – think tuition fees are too high.

Given the visibility of the tuition fee issue, it is no surprise that every party has made affordability a key component of their post-secondary education platforms. The PC party is proposing to make financial aid more accessible to middle class families, thereby allowing a larger number of students to access loan support. However, the PC platform does not make any provision for controlling the rise of Ontario tuition fees or reducing actual up-front educational costs.

The Liberal platform proposes reducing post-secondary tuition rates by 30 per cent for lower- and middle-class families through a new tuition grant, which would apply to full-time students in undergraduate programs. The grant would be available to students whose families earn less than \$160,000 a year. It is claimed that this would result in an annual saving of about \$1,600 per university student and more than \$700 for every student enrolled in college and cover more than 85% of Ontario higher education students. The funding for the grant would be directed to each institution, and then

applied to a student's tuition account. The cost of this initiative, which would begin on January 1, 2012, would initially be \$200 million, increasing to \$486 million a year by 2015-16.

This is a significant initiative designed to address the affordability concerns held by the majority of Ontarians. The scope of the program means that it will have a substantial effect on the upfront costs of low- and middle-income students and their families, groups that have been disproportionately affected by tuition fee increases.<sup>2</sup> This policy is also attractive in the sense that it does not remove revenue from the university system; institutions will receive the same tuition revenue as before, with students reaping savings through an effective instant rebate. However, this policy does not actually control the rise of tuition fees – they will continue to increase according to the five per cent maximum mandated by the current tuition fee policy. A policy, it should be noted, introduced and maintained by the Liberal Party.

The ONDP are proposing to freeze tuition at current rates, and eliminate the interest on student loans. While this move will help control the costs of higher education, and significantly ease the burden of repaying student loans, there are some problems with this proposal.

OCUFA's position on tuition fee freezes has always been that such a move must be accompanied by compensatory funding to universities. While freezing tuition fees improves affordability, it also removes revenue from the university system in the form of projected fee increases. If this funding hole is not filled with public funding, this will negatively impact university finances and may lead to a decrease in quality. The NDP proposal only proposes compensatory funding of 2.5 per cent per year, or about \$830 million. This is well below the 5 per cent revenue increase currently provided by the existing tuition fee policy. In short, the NDP is proposing to fund only a portion of the total cost of the tuition freeze to individual institutions. In a system that will be facing significant growth pressure, this will likely harm the quality of higher education in Ontario.

The Green Party is also proposing a tuition fee freeze, and have indicated that they will “maintain university budgets” for the duration of the freeze. This can be interpreted to mean that they will fund the freeze at a level that does not remove revenue from the system. While this is a more appropriate structure for a fee freeze, the Green Party has not provided costing data that describes how they will fund this commitment.

### *Protecting collective bargaining and academic staff*

In times of deficit, governments may seek savings by attacking the collective bargaining rights of workers, or seeking to cap or restrain hard-won compensation and benefits. This is not only unfair, but it is also misguided: broader public sector workers, like professors and librarians, are members of the community and participants in the economy. Reducing their salaries and benefits only serves to hurt Ontario families and the economic recovery.

The Ontario Liberal Party is committed to following through on the Drummond Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Service, led by former TD economist Dan Drummond. While this commission has not yet reported, it is likely that its recommendations will have some implication for the broader public sector, including universities. However, the Liberals have also

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<sup>2</sup> *Under Pressure: The Impact of Rising Tuition Fees on Ontario Families*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/under-pressure>

stated that they will not pursue “slash-and-burn” cuts in the public sector, and their platform does not contain any specific reference to restraining public sector salaries or benefits. Nevertheless, the McGuinty government did legislate a wage freeze for non-union employees in the broader public service, and promoted a wage freeze policy for unions negotiating collective agreements after the 2010 Ontario Budget. This record should be kept in mind while assessing the labour-friendliness of the Ontario Liberal Party.

For their part, the PCs have signaled their intention to go after public sector compensation. From their platform:

*In recent years, arbitrators have awarded unions excessive contracts, even as Ontario has been saddled with record deficits and a struggling economy. Ontario families get stuck with the bill.*

*We will fix this costly problem. We will require arbitrators to respect the ability of taxpayers to pay, and take into account local circumstances. We will make the system more transparent and accountable by requiring arbitrators to explain the reasons for their decisions. When arbitrators make decisions that cost Ontario families money, those families deserve to know why.*

The proposed attempt to restrain public sector salaries would be inappropriate and harmful, while the interference with labour arbitration presents an untoward government intrusion into collective bargaining.

The PC Party has also indicated a desire to go after unions themselves:

*We will change Ontario’s labour laws to give union members more flexibility and a greater voice. We will give all individuals the right to a secret ballot in certification votes. We will introduce paycheck protection so union members are not forced to pay fees towards political causes they don’t support.*

*Unions will be required to be transparent and open with their financial information, just as businesses and charities are. This will enable union members to know exactly how their dues are being spent.*

While these proposals are framed as protecting union members, they are really ways to limit and weaken the political advocacy of unions in Ontario. Clearly, this is not something the OCUFA or its members can support. Neither is it a necessary policy: Ontario union financial information is already transparent, budgets are approved by union members or their delegates, and the allocation of funding for advocacy is controlled through democratic means.

At this time, neither the ONDP nor Green Party has indicated any plans to go after public sector compensation or interfere with the collective bargaining rights of unions and their membership.

#### *Other proposals*

One additional aspect of the Ontario Liberal Party platform deserves some attention. Their plan includes establishing three “new, leading-edge undergraduate campuses” at a cost of \$300 million in new funds. Determining the location of these campuses will involve an application process, and the government

would look favourably on applications that emphasized regions partnering with colleges and universities, that were job-focused, and also leveraged more credit transfer and online education activity.

OCUFA has several concerns with this proposal. As in the past, capital funding for satellite campuses not covered by the provincial government places strains on the operating funding of the parent institution. As well, academic and non-academic services for students at satellites have been less available than those at the main campus, and working conditions and governance provisions for faculty have, in a number of cases, not been at the same standard as those on the main campus. The structure of the Liberal plan may amplify these longstanding problems. The involvement of community colleges, the emphasis on credit transfer and on-line programs, and the focus on employment-related education could shape these new campuses in ways that would likely negatively affect educational quality, conditions of work for faculty and librarians, and the student experience. Depending on whom the government asks to respond to the request for proposals, these initiatives could put universities and their academic communities at the margins of planning to the detriment of academic excellence. While the devil is very much in the details with this type of proposal, there is reason to approach the Liberal campus plan with some caution.

#### *Conclusion: Missing Pieces*

While growth and affordability have dominated the platforms of Ontario's major political parties, there is still far too little attention being paid to the issue of quality on Ontario's campuses. Universities should be open to every willing and qualified student, and tuition fees should likewise be affordable for Ontario families. However, unless we ensure a quality learning experience, growth and affordability investments will do little to enhance the education students receive. OCUFA will be working beyond the 2011 election to ensure that our institutions have the resources they need to provide an excellent education for our students.

It is also disturbing to see anti-union and anti-public sector rhetoric advanced as part of a party platform. This is harmful, divisive and ultimately counterproductive to the goal of a high quality university system and an inclusive, prosperous Ontario.

We hope this document has clarified the various positions of Ontario's political parties on the province's higher education system. Please consider these policies carefully, and raise your conclusions at an all-candidates debate, on the doorstep when meeting candidates, and at the ballot box. You can also register your support for higher education through OCUFA's Quality Matters campaign ([www.quality-matters.ca](http://www.quality-matters.ca)). If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact OCUFA at [info@ocufa.on.ca](mailto:info@ocufa.on.ca).