



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

Missing the forest for the trees: OCUFA's response to the Ministry of Training Colleges and University's

Discussion paper on Postsecondary Education: Sustainability and Renewal

February 15, 2019

Summary of recommendations

OCUFA recommends that the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities:

- i. Work with COU to ensure timely data on hiring trends in the postsecondary sector is available and widely shared with other stakeholders, including on full-time tenured faculty and contract faculty, in order to allow for data-driven discussion and policy on faculty renewal and other issues in the postsecondary sector.
- ii. Commit to adopting policy and providing adequate funding levels to encourage universities to invest in hiring more full-time tenure-track faculty and replace retiring faculty members with full-time tenure stream faculty.
- iii. Conduct meaningful consultations with sector stakeholders on the key challenges facing the postsecondary sector in Ontario, which include: the chronic lack of funding, an alarming shift towards precarious, contract academic positions and faculty renewal-replacing retiring faculty members with full-time, tenure track faculty.
- iv. Ensure that any policy implementation respects existing collective agreements and ongoing collective bargaining between faculty associations and university employers.

We view these issues to be pressing and more worthy of the Ministry's attention than the narrow focus in its recent discussion paper.

Overview

OCUFA welcomes the Ministry's consultation with sector partners on the issue of faculty renewal. We believe dialogue is critical to addressing the complex challenges in our sector and this is a step in the right direction. However, we are disappointed in the Ministry's lack of consultation with sector partners, including OCUFA, since the change in government eight months ago. The critical policy decisions announced on January 17 took place without any consultation with the sector.

OCUFA, the Ontario Universities and Colleges Coalition (OUCC) in which OCUFA is a member, and other sector partners have repeatedly requested meetings with Minister Fullerton, and all our requests to date have gone unanswered.

We also welcome the MTCU's attention to faculty renewal. Replacing retiring tenured faculty with tenure stream faculty is a key priority for faculty associations across Ontario. However, the current dialogue on faculty renewal cannot take place in isolation from the changes announced January 17 and the general funding climate in Ontario.

The state of postsecondary education in Ontario

The available data paints a grim picture of the state of postsecondary education funding in Ontario.

University funding levels have been trailing the rest of the country for over a decade. As of 2017-18, Ontario's per-student funding amounted to \$7,939. This means Ontario's per-student funding was a staggering 36 per cent lower than the average for the rest of Canada which was \$12,383 per student.

Ontario also has the highest student-faculty ratio in Canada. For over a decade, full-time faculty hiring at Ontario's universities has not kept pace with student enrolment. In the classroom, the gap between enrolment and faculty hiring has a dramatic impact.

As of 2017-18, there were 31 students for every full-time faculty member at an Ontario university compared to an average of 22 students for each university faculty member across the rest of Canada. Ontario is far and away the worst on this measure – the province with next highest student-faculty ratio in the country is Quebec, with a ratio of 24 to 1.

These trends have a negative impact on teaching and learning in Ontario. Having more students and fewer professors leads to less one-on-one engagement, larger class sizes, fewer opportunities for mentorship and academic advising, and diminished chances for undergraduate students to be involved in the research projects of their professors.

Discussion of, and developing policy around, faculty renewal must take this context into account.

The alarming rise in contract hiring

The nature of academic work has undergone a dramatic and troubling shift over the past decade. While full-time faculty hiring has stagnated at Ontario universities, the reliance on contract faculty has increased. These contract professors are generally hired on either a limited-term contract or as sessionals on a per-course basis.

The January 2018 Faculty at Work report by the Council of Ontario Universities shows that in the 2014-15 academic year, contract faculty represented over half (58 per cent) of the academic workforce, while full-time tenure-stream faculty only represented 42 per cent of academic staff.

The October 2018 “Contract U” report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives also reveals that more than half of all faculty appointments in Canada are contract appointments.

OCUFA also estimates that the number of courses taught by contract faculty has doubled since 2000.

Rather than serving as a temporary stopgap measure to accommodate significant enrolment increases in the early 2000s, the use of contract faculty has become an entrenched strategy in universities across Ontario.

Structural barriers to faculty renewal

While we value the MTCU’s attention to the issue of faculty renewal, we are disappointed with Ministry’s narrow approach and the lack of attention to the barriers to faculty renewal.

In its consultation paper, the Ministry presumes that the decreased rate of junior faculty hiring is due to some faculty members working past the age of 65. This assumption is largely made without any data and minimizes the negative impact of underfunded postsecondary institutions on full-time faculty hiring rates over the past decade and disregards the drastic increase in the hiring of precarious, contract faculty at Ontario universities.

Furthermore, the consultation paper overemphasizes the matter of a small number of senior employees collecting a pension while working past the age of 65 and presumes that they exert an “upward pressure” on labour costs. In addition, the paper provides no data to substantiate this claim. Pension payments to senior employees are in fact not an expenditure for institutions. Instead, they are forms of deferred wage entitlements paid from the employees’ retirement accounts. Given these facts, the Ministry’s focus on pensions as part of its examination of faculty renewal is simply misplaced.

Moreover, exploring practices such as reducing salary levels for senior employees past the age of 65 may in fact discourage faculty renewal as it would offer the institutions an economic incentive to keep more employees over the age of 65 in the workforce. In addition, the general tone of the discussion seems to focus on late career faculty as a drain on the system, when in fact many senior faculty lead major grant funded research projects that attract significant revenue to our institutions and address many of the most pressing social, cultural, and economic challenges facing Ontario.

We urge the Ministry to examine the broader context of postsecondary education in Ontario to understand the real reasons behind the dramatic decrease in hiring rates of full time tenure stream faculty. In particular, we urge the Ministry to consider the systemic underfunding of Ontario's universities in comparison with the rest of the country, and growing trends of hiring of precarious contract faculty at postsecondary institutions.

Faculty renewal is a long-term priority for faculty associations across Ontario and is crucial to the sustainability of Ontario's universities. OCUFA has repeatedly called on the Ontario government to take leadership by making a province-wide commitment to faculty renewal.

We believe that a true commitment to faculty renewal must include a plan to replace retiring faculty members with full-time tenure stream faculty, increase overall full-time faculty hiring and deliver fairness for contract faculty.

Employment and retirement rights

Any examination of faculty renewal, replacing retiring tenured faculty with tenure stream faculty, must take into account several key factors.

First, Ontario's universities are autonomous institutions, where the rights and employment conditions of faculty, including retirement and pensions, are governed by collective agreements. Most faculty associations are certified and bargain under the rules set out by the Labour Relations Act. These agreements are routinely negotiated and revised through collective bargaining between faculty associations and university administrations.

Collective agreements are unique to each institution, and any policy or legislation around faculty retirement rights and benefits must respect collective agreements and negotiated pension policies.

Secondly, in 2006, mandatory retirement was eliminated in Ontario, as a step towards ending age discrimination in employment. We believe that universities tremendously benefit from the experience of long-serving faculty members. Senior faculty are invaluable to the strength of collegial governance at their institutions. Their experience and expertise allow them to make vital contributions to their institution, community and the province as a whole. Their contributions as teachers, researchers, community leaders and mentors to hundreds of students are invaluable and cannot be reduced to a number.

Any policy on faculty renewal must respect and understand the contributions of senior faculty members and the needs of and obstacles facing faculty who are at the start of their careers. While many collective agreement provisions include incentives and options for faculty around retirement, any policy or legislation around this issue must also respect the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Finally, it is important to understand the factors that determine a long-serving faculty member's decision to retire.

It takes 10-15 years of education and research for faculty to enter the professoriate, which means that most faculty members begin their full-time careers much later than individuals in other professions. The late start of faculty members' careers makes it so that a comparison of average retirement age across sectors, where the starting age is much earlier, is reductive at best.

Senior faculty members' decision about when to retire is often weighed against the backdrop of what will happen to their department when they retire. Too often, we hear retiring professors' concerns that there are no guarantees that a full-time, tenure stream faculty member will be hired to fill their position and fulfill the research, teaching and service duties of their department. This concern over the future of the department or program of a retiring faculty member may serve as a disincentive for earlier retirement.

A real commitment to faculty renewal requires the Ministry to take leadership in setting a standard of fairness for contract faculty across the sector, committing to policy and adequate funding levels that would encourage universities to invest in hiring more full-time tenure-track faculty and committing to hiring full-time tenure stream faculty when faculty members retire. This is essential to increase Ontario's faculty-student ratio, and close the funding gap with other provinces in Canada and ensure Ontario's universities are sustainable and competitive.

Hiring full-time tenure stream faculty allows the experts in any given field to set, administer and teach the curriculum in their area of research, and keep the programs in which they teach relevant and up to date. The research component of full-time tenured faculty's work promotes innovation and expands Ontario's economy. Tenure and academic freedom also support meaningful engagement with new and challenging ideas, even if they are not popular, in the classroom, university community and beyond.

While the postsecondary sector is faced with a chronic shortage of funding, an alarming shift towards precarious, contract academic positions and the lack of commitment to faculty renewal-replacing retiring faculty members with full-time, tenure track faculty, we think the narrow focus in the Ministry's recent discussion is misplaced. More pressing issues require the Ministry's urgent attention and leadership.

On HEQCO

Finally, we feel the need to discuss HEQCO's role in the faculty renewal dialogue in Ontario. During these consultations and in several other contexts, HEQCO has been characterized as a stakeholder or as an independent organization providing research and advice to government. We believe neither of these characterizations are true and perpetuating them distorts the debate and engenders cynicism.

As specified in the *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act (2005)*, the function of HEQCO is to develop and make recommendations to the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities on "all aspects of the postsecondary education sector, including improving the quality of education provided in the sector, access to postsecondary education, and accountability of postsecondary educational institutions."

While HEQCO describes itself as an ‘arm’s-length’ agency, in reality it is important to recognize that the Council is directly accountable to the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities. In addition, HEQCO has been tasked with monitoring compliance with the government’s recent controversial policy directive on free speech.

As such, it is not a think tank or an independent research institute – it is a crown agency. We believe any attempt to brand HEQCO otherwise will undermine the dialogue and marginalize the role of actual stakeholders in the sector. While HEQCO may offer some research capacity to support ministry policy, HEQCO does not constitute an independent voice in contributing meaningfully to, testing or challenging government direction, as a true stakeholder with lived experience of university work is able to do.

Conclusion

As noted, we appreciate the Ministry’s ongoing interest in faculty renewal and we appreciate the opportunity to participate in this consultation. However, we would be remiss if we did not echo some of the concerns our members expressed about the truncated and narrow nature of this consultation process. As we outline above, any meaningful discussion of faculty renewal cannot be isolated from the larger challenges facing the system of postsecondary education in Ontario. Any sustainable solution to faculty renewal must address the postsecondary funding gap in Ontario. In addition, any meaningful dialogue about faculty renewal must steer clear of stereotypes about senior faculty and be guided by solutions that respect collective agreements and long standing pension agreements. OCUFA appreciates this opportunity to share our views and looks forward to a constructive and ongoing conversation to ensure fairness for all faculty and a high quality public postsecondary education system that serves all Ontarians.