

# **Growing Ontario's Universities for the Future**

**OCUFA's Response to *Strengthening Ontario's  
Centres of Creativity, Innovation and  
Knowledge***

**OCUFA**

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

*“The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they understand about what they imagine they can design.”*  
-Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*

It may seem strange to begin this submission with a quote from Friedrich Hayek, who would have likely looked dimly on OCUFA’s foundational policy goal – the maintenance of accessible, high quality public higher education institutions through robust and sustained government investment. But while we may disagree with his prescriptions for public life, his quote contains an important point: institutions and systems are complicated and organic, and it is folly to attempt to impose a structure upon them from above. To put it another way, OCUFA believes that good universities are not built. They are grown.

Ontario has already cultivated an impressive university sector. Each of the province’s universities delivers high quality teaching and learning. Our institutions have also adapted to accommodate a growing number of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, contributing to Ontario’s world-leading post-secondary education attainment rates. In 2009, 28 per cent of Ontarians had a university credential, higher than both the Canadian and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) averages.<sup>1</sup>

However, the sector faces significant challenges. Ontario’s universities are seriously underfunded. Right now, universities in Ontario receive the lowest per-student public funding in Canada at \$8,349. That’s 34 per cent lower than the Canadian average. This underfunding has

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario and Canadian figures based on: Statistics Canada, *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program April 2011* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-582-x/81-582-x2011001-eng.htm>). Ottawa: Statistics Canada. OECD figures from: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD indicators* (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012.htm>)

serious consequences: Ontario now has the worst student to faculty ratio in Canada, at 28:1. This means larger classes and less student interaction with faculty. Underfunding also leads to deteriorating facilities and poor access to the latest learning technology. For students and their families, underfunding means that Ontario now has the highest tuition fees in Canada. As enrolment continues to climb, stagnant public funding means that quality and affordability will be further constrained.

Ontario’s professors and academic librarians recognize that higher education continues to be one of the Government of Ontario’s priorities. The discussion paper, *Strengthening Ontario’s Centres of Creativity, Innovation, and Knowledge*, is emblematic of this continuing interest. As well, we are aware that Ontario is facing fiscal challenges; however, it is important to recognize that these challenges are not inevitable; they are the result of political choices. The current fiscal situation is due in no small part to the government’s unwillingness to address a long legacy of tax cuts and their impact on public revenue.

Fiscal considerations are the primary motivation for the government’s “transformational change” agenda. However, there are other assumptions and implications contained within the discussion paper that are of great concern to Ontario’s professors and academic librarians. This document will highlight these concerns and question the rationale presented in the paper, with the ultimate goal of building a more comprehensive, collaborative, and evidence-based reform process. Universities are essential to the success of Ontario’s students, the strength of our economy, and the vitality of our society. We need them to work, and we need them to work for everyone. The only way to address new challenges and build on current successes is to leverage the knowledge, experience, and insight that exist throughout the university sector.

# Principles For Quality Higher Education in Ontario

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A thriving higher education system must be grounded in clear principles that protect the integrity of our institutions. OCUFA believes that the following principles are essential to a healthy, high quality and accountable university sector:

## Fund for success, not performance

Public funding is the single biggest determinant of the quality, accessibility, and affordability of higher education in Ontario. With that in mind, it is vital that the university funding formula be set up to ensure the best possible student experience, the best possible research, and the best possible conditions for institutional success.


No question, Ontario's current funding formula could work better. It is complicated, and may not reflect the current needs of the sector. However, the current model has at its core an important idea: university funding should be sensitive to students. That is, funding should be distributed to universities on the basis of the number of students at a given institution, and sensitive to the relative cost of the programs in which those students are enrolled.

For years, it has been suggested that this student-responsive model should be removed, and that universities should be funded on the basis of their performance, or their ability to meet benchmarks set by the Government of Ontario. OCUFA has long opposed this view, for a simple reason: **performance funding makes quality improvement impossible.**

Think of it this way: say someone gives you a certain amount of insulation to build a warm house. You build it, and it turns out to be not warm enough. So, you are made to build it again, but this time with less insulation. This is the self-defeating logic of performance funding: if an institution does not meet its benchmarks, the government punishes it by removing a portion of the resources it needs to improve.

Not only does this cripple the institution, but it also unfairly penalizes the students at that institution. From the perspective of professors and academic librarians, it is better to promote a collaborative environment of continuous improvement at Ontario universities. The best way to do this is through adequate, predictable, and student-focused public funding.

Unfortunately, Ontario's universities are significantly underfunded. As already noted, the province has the lowest level of per-student funding in Canada. In fact, our universities now receive 25 per cent *less* operating funding per student from the provincial government than they did in 1990. This chronic shortage of financial resources means larger class sizes, less student contact with faculty, aging facilities, and rising tuition fees. In short: underfunding hurts students. In order to be successful, it is essential that our institutions are given the financial resources they require to provide an affordable and high quality education for every student. While there are certainly ways to maximize existing funding and achieve some efficiencies – such as pooling administrative functions and rationalizing administration – there is no way



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around the basic resource shortages that now plague Ontario's universities.

Every available piece of research suggests that funding higher education is an investment; every public dollar spent on universities will deliver significant social and economic benefits in the future. It is imperative that the government find a way to renew its investment in higher education and increase per-student funding to ensure our social and economic vitality as a province, no matter the current fiscal limitations.

### **Institutions should not be controlled by government**

Ever since the rise of the university in medieval Europe, institutional autonomy has been one of its most important values. There are both philosophical and practical reasons for this. In order to remain as centres of critical thought and knowledge creation, universities must be free from the control of government. The objectives of government vary according to the election cycle, and short-term political expedience does not lead to sound higher education policy or good academic decision-making. When universities are properly independent, they are insulated from the uncertainties of politics. This independence has allowed universities to weather the rise and fall of empires, the depredations of dictators, and innumerable wars, all the while contributing the knowledge and educating the thinkers that have allowed modern society to thrive.

Practically, academic decision-making is best left to those best able to respond to the needs of students, communities, and the province – the professors, administrators, and student leaders within the university itself. Information and knowledge about effective teaching and research practices are diffuse and rooted both in local communities and specialized global networks. Likewise, universities are in the best position to determine, and respond to, the unique needs of its student body—needs that

will vary considerably by institution and region. Government does not have access to the information needed to make effective academic decisions nor does it have the expertise. By keeping administration and decision-making local, we preserve the capacity of the system to adapt to changing needs and emerging demands.

As a funder of the university sector, the Government of Ontario – and the citizens they represent – has every right to expect that institutions be accountable for the public funds they receive. It is important that universities be able to demonstrate that public investment is leading to exceptional student outcomes, innovative research, and community engagement. However, accountability does not mean control. If an institution is experiencing difficulty in meeting these expectations, then the government should work collaboratively with that institution to achieve better results. Government should not be allowed to dictate results, set benchmarks arbitrarily, or interfere with internal academic governance.

### **University education in Ontario should be affordable for students**

Even the best quality university education will be meaningless if it is too expensive for students and their families. Likewise, a university sector that leaves graduates saddled with debt undermines its own effectiveness at promoting social mobility and economic success. Therefore, it is essential an Ontario university education remain affordable for every willing and qualified student.

Unfortunately, Ontario has far to go in this area. The province currently has the highest tuition fees in Canada, at \$7,180 (nearly 29 per cent higher than the national average).<sup>2</sup> While the

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2012) Average undergraduate tuition fees for Canadian full-time students, by province. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily->

new 30 per cent tuition fee rebate provides welcome relief to some students, it is not universally available to all who may need it. A recent report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) indicated that, even with the tuition grant, Ontario has one of the least affordable university sectors in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this is not a sustainable situation.

OCUFA believes that the high cost of tuition in Ontario is due to the decline of per-student public funding for universities. When universities are unable to get the resources they need from the government, they must turn to students and their families. We believe that it is inappropriate to fund higher education on the backs of students, and that increased public investment is the only way to reduce student costs while simultaneously promoting high quality universities.

The affordability question adds increased urgency to the shortage of public investment in Ontario's universities. This should be a central concern of any government going forward.

### **Academic freedom must be protected**

Just as institutional autonomy is fundamental to the university, academic freedom is fundamental to the professors and academic librarians who work within it. The freedom to comment, teach, and research without fear of professional or personal reprisal is essential to the university's ability to foster critical thought, expand knowledge through research, and teach students effectively. Without academic freedom, universities would cease to perform their many educational, social, economic, and civic missions.

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[quodien/120912/t120912a001-eng.htm](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/edudeflation-and-high-cost-learning). Accessed on September 27, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2012) *Eduflation and the High Cost of Learning*. Ottawa: The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/edudeflation-and-high-cost-learning>

But academic freedom means more than just freedom from interference from within an institution. It also means that academic staff should be insulated against external players who seek to impose particular pedagogical approaches, standardized course content, or narrow research agendas. This is not to say that those external to the university can have no meaningful input. Rather, it implies the need to work collaboratively with professors to achieve mutually desirable results, and to resist the temptation to take a top-down approach to reform.

### **The many social, economic, scientific and civic roles of the university must be preserved**

In his book *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy*, George Fallis observes that modern universities are animated by four basic ideas: the university as a place of undergraduate liberal education; of graduate education and research; of professional schools; and of accessible education and applied research.<sup>4</sup> To this we can add a related set of social and economic roles: to train critical and engaged citizens; to train students to enter and succeed in the labour market; to discover new knowledge that benefits society broadly; to discover new knowledge with economic and commercial value; to interpret and evaluate existing knowledge and current events; and to participate in the development of students as *people* and *citizens*, not just as participants in the labour market.

Clearly, universities are unique among modern institutions in the breadth and complexity of the missions they are expected to fulfill. They are also unique in the sense that these missions are not always mutually supporting. As Fallis notes, universities "combine conflicting ideas."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fallis, G. (2007) *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; p. 18

This inherent conflict is not a weakness. Rather, the dynamic tension between its various roles has allowed the modern university to innovate and adapt to changing societal needs and expectations.

To preserve this defining characteristic, it is important that government policy does not over-privilege one university role over another. Forcing an institution, for example, to put all of its resources into labour market preparation will distort its mission and diminish its ability to function as a university. No question, labour market preparation is an important function of any higher education institution. But it is no more important than any other role played by a given university. Therefore, it is important that institutional governance and public policy protect and promote all of the roles and objectives of Ontario's universities to ensure that they remain relevant and dynamic institutions.

### **Reforms should be appropriate to the Ontario context**

The great education comparativist, Sir Michael Sadler, once observed:

*"We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered in the soil at home, we shall have a live plant."*<sup>6</sup>

Here, Sadler hits upon a central point: educational systems evolve in specific cultural, social, and policy contexts. We should therefore

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<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Hayhoe, R. and Mundy, K. (2008) Introduction to Comparative and International Education: Why Study Comparative Education? In K. Mundy, R. Hayhoe, M. Madden, and K. Madjidi (Eds.) Comparative Education: Issues for Teachers. New York and Toronto: Teachers College Press and Canadian Scholars Press. p. 6.

be cautious when looking to other jurisdictions for ideas on how to reform Ontario universities. No question, we have much to learn from other countries on how best to structure higher education to achieve the best results for students, just as other jurisdictions may learn from us. However, without careful consideration of the unique circumstances that exist in both the jurisdictions of interest and in Ontario, importing ideas wholesale is not an effective way to create public policy.

For example, the discussion paper makes frequent reference to efforts to create the European Higher Education Area, commonly referred to as "The Bologna Process". While this is an interesting initiative which seeks a comprehensive approach to policy, it is also rooted in the political structure and social history of Europe. Moreover, it is aimed at solving an entirely different set of policy challenges than those articulated in the MTCU discussion paper. Europe is seeking to harmonize its education system to improve labour market mobility for its citizens, while MTCU is apparently interested in fostering greater innovation and productivity. Using Bologna as an exemplar for reform is therefore a mismatch in terms of both context and objectives.

We urge the Government of Ontario to consider the unique circumstances and needs of our province when approaching reform of the university sector. Uncritical borrowing from other jurisdictions will have a negative impact on the quality of education in the province.

### **Reform must be based on solid evidence and research**

It is almost axiomatic that good public policy should be based on evidence. We need to understand what is and isn't working in the current environment, and be able to thoughtfully evaluate potential solutions to the challenges facing higher education in Ontario. No matter the urgency of the need for reform,

taking the time to develop a complete picture of higher education in Ontario will pay dividends in the years to come.

Since knowledge of and experience in Ontario's higher education sector is diffuse and spread among the various stakeholder groups, evidence-based reform necessarily implies the need for careful consultation and collaboration. The Government of Ontario has numerous resources it can draw upon to conduct the research it needs to implement successful reforms: its own staff in the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities; higher

education policy experts at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and at other Ontario universities; the Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario, The Canadian Federation of Students, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, the College Student Alliance, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, and OCUFA, among others. Only by leveraging these resources can effective interventions be created—the complexity of higher education means that no single individual or organization has the ability to design meaningful reforms.

## The MTCU Discussion Paper: A Critical Overview

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Before examining the specific questions and proposals contained within *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation, and Knowledge*, it is useful to explore some overarching concerns that professors and academic librarians have with the discussion paper. These concerns are primarily focused on the ambiguities, assumptions, and incomplete knowledge that inform portions of the paper.

### Definitional problems

The discussion paper does a poor job of clearly identifying the challenge, or challenges, the proposed reforms are meant to address. This is a key ambiguity that limits the ability of the paper to promote a meaningful discussion around university reform. Over the course of the summer consultations, and through subsequent discussions with civil servants, it has become clear that the primary goal the discussion paper meant to address is cost containment. That is, the government is attempting to accommodate rising enrolment and preserve educational quality without investing additional public funds into the system. This will be achieved through efficiency mechanisms and the “redeployment of resources”. The failure to state this goal clearly makes it difficult to have a serious discussion about the public funding of higher education. This is the question at the heart of the future of university education in Ontario, and simply talking around it does not do the university sector any favours.

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Without a clear definition of the problem, there is also no clear rationale for the questions posed by the paper, or the reforms it suggests. Worse, once the underlying goal – cost-containment – is actually understood, the policy proposals become somewhat incoherent. As we shall see, very few of the paper’s proposals will actually deliver any cost savings. In fact, many of them will be extremely expensive.

The paper also does not adequately define “productivity” for the purposes of discussion. When it comes to higher education, productivity could mean any number of things. Definitions matter: how we understand productivity will influence the nature of the goals that are identified, and whether professors and academic librarians can support these goals.

For example, if we define “productivity” as graduation rates – or the number of students who actually complete their credential – then the concept would enjoy wide support. Increasing graduation rates would save the system millions in lost revenue, and would ensure better outcomes for more students. If, however, we define productivity as increasing the number of students taught by a given professor, then academic staff will be opposed to increasing this *type* of productivity. Gains in this area come at the expense of educational quality, and would therefore harm students. Similarly, educating more students at the same level of overall funding is another ostensible productivity gain that would be opposed by professors and librarians. Further eroding the



amount of per-student funding will do nothing to improve the quality of higher education in Ontario. If we want to have a serious discussion on productivity, more clarity is needed from the government on what exactly is meant by the term, and what goals productivity gains are meant to serve.

The concept of innovation is also not well articulated in the paper. Generally, innovation occurs in response to a specific problem or challenge. It does not happen for its own sake. Innovation is also seldom a top-down process; it occurs due to grassroots collaboration and leadership. It is rare that somebody innovates because they were told to. The discussion paper does not appear to recognize these realities, and consequently its approach to “innovation” is somewhat distorted. A government-mandated labour-market credential is not innovative. A new credential designed by an institution to meet the needs of its students and communities is.

We hope the Government of Ontario will work with all university stakeholders to refine and clarify these concepts. This is essential in order to have a productive conversation about how best to achieve improvements in quality and to enhance the student experience.

### **Incomplete knowledge of the current situation**

The research program implied by the discussion paper is substantial. In order to answer the questions set out by the paper, we would need to acquire a huge quantity of information not currently available in Ontario. A small sampling of these missing data pieces include:

- Whether there is a mismatch between a student’s education and their labour market outcomes;
- Whether existing measures of learning outcomes are inadequate for the province’s needs;

- Whether online education is a cheaper or more efficient option when scaled across the entire university sector;
- Student demand for online learning; and
- Actual student interest in a new, three-year credential at Ontario’s universities.

This list could go on at some length. The point is that there is still much that we do not know, or only understand partially, about higher education in Ontario. The first step to a successful reform program is to gather all of the relevant information together, identify data gaps, and conduct the research necessary to fill those gaps.

While the discussion paper provides a useful overview of some of the trends facing higher education in Ontario, it does not demonstrate a thorough grasp of the data needed to answer the questions it poses. Ontario’s professors and academic librarians suggest that the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, in collaboration with university stakeholders, begin a comprehensive program to understand the university sector. In particular, it will be important to analyze what is working well, and where improvements need to be made.

The discussion paper’s incomplete understanding of the university sector is clear in the two key assumptions that appear to inform its analysis: Ontario universities are not innovative, and that they are insufficiently productive. In truth, a huge amount of pedagogical innovation is occurring throughout the sector every day. While this work may not be highly visible or part of a provincial initiative, it nevertheless contributes to better student outcomes and to creating more efficient institutions. A careful and comprehensive survey of the sector would bring many of these innovations to light, and should be conducted immediately.

As for productivity, the sector has made remarkable gains over the past decade. The

average professor now teaches 22 per cent more students than they did in 2000. Ontario university operating costs per student are also 13 per cent lower than the Canadian average, and faculty salaries per student are 18 per cent below the rest of Canada. We also have the highest student-to-faculty ratio (28:1), which implies that Ontario's professors are educating more students than anywhere else in the country. We are educating more students with fewer resources than most jurisdictions in Canada – a textbook example of enhanced productivity.

However, productivity is a double-edged sword. At some point, doing more with less just becomes less with less. OCUFA firmly believes that students achieve better results with face-to-face instruction from full-time professors, and that this is only possible by keeping student-to-faculty ratios low. Ontario's universities have delivered productivity increases by allowing enrolment to outpace the hiring of new full-time faculty. But it has now reached the point where these productivity gains are threatening the quality of higher education in Ontario. Again, this underscores the urgent need to invest in our universities. Funds for hiring of new professors would dramatically improve the student experience and enhance our retention and graduation rates.

Overall, the discussion paper is based on an incomplete understanding of Ontario's higher education sector. As a result, it assumes that innovation is insufficient, and that productivity is stagnant. It also misses the inverse relationship between quality and productivity. We are convinced that a thorough accounting of innovation, productivity, and quality will reveal that Ontario's universities are already doing more with less, and further pressure in this direction will hurt the student experience.

### Questions around meaningful consultation

OCUFA has been an active participant in the discussion paper roundtables, and is one of the few stakeholders to have attended every session. However, as the process has progressed, we have become increasingly worried about the nature of the consultations. Specifically, we are concerned that stakeholder feedback will not be included in the government's ultimate plan, and that important decisions have already been made.

At several of the roundtable sessions, comments made by senior government representatives suggested that policy work had already begun on some of the more contentious areas of proposed reform – notably the university funding formula and the three-year, labour market focused credential. Comments were also made during the sessions that indicated the government's apparent irritation with the sector's reluctance to embrace the discussion paper's broad vision. Initiating reforms without stakeholder input and scolding participants for disagreeing with the government's position do not suggest a meaningful consultation process.

At all of the roundtable sessions, broad consensus was achieved on a variety of issues. The participants recognized that technology enhanced learning could deliver real benefits to students, but only with a significant upfront investment. Participants were also unified in their opposition to tying funding to learning outcomes, one of the paper's policy proposals. OCUFA's expectation is that these perspectives will be reflected in MTCU's concrete policy proposals. If they are not, then it will be clear that the consultations were largely *pro forma*.

## Responding to Discussion Questions and Proposals

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*Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* raises a wide range of questions for discussion and introduces for consideration specific proposals for reform. Those questions and proposals that are of greatest interest to OCUFA will be dealt with in this section. Overall, the policy direction implied by the discussion paper's questions and proposals would lead to an increase in government intervention in matters that are rightly the domain of academic decision-making processes. This intrusion into the independence of Ontario's universities is troubling insofar as it threatens institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

### Expanded credential options and supplements

Taken together, the discussion questions and proposals pertaining to expanded credential options all assume that the current range of degree options is insufficient and fails to meet student demand – an assumption that is not supported by evidence in the discussion paper. Moreover, the types of solutions considered to remedy this presumed shortcoming would have universities move toward an increased focus on job preparation and labour market readiness, rather than on critical inquiry, discovery and knowledge creation. While they invariably prepare students for the job market by equipping them with key communication, critical thinking and other valuable flexible and adaptable workplace skills, universities are and ought to be more than centres for job training.

An institution that focuses primarily on job preparation fails to provide its students with the rigorous and well-rounded education that they expect and deserve from a university.

### *Supporting flexible degree structures that provide new learning options made possible by advancements in technology.*

Ideas around “stackable credentials” and “multi-institutional students” were floated at the consultation roundtables. While these degree structures may hold some appeal as novel ways of delivering higher education, we must not lose sight of the reality of how higher education is structured and funded in Ontario. In effect, the discussion paper proposes a structural shift toward a system in which students are not affiliated with any one university and take courses from a variety of institutions in order to cobble together a credential that incorporates prior learning and can be built upon for further credentialing. This proposed structure is at odds with the logistical realities of a high quality and publicly funded higher education system. By focusing on the courses and credits required to obtain a credential, and separating students from the institutions that deliver these courses, the funding structures that enable universities to deliver high quality programs – i.e. tuition fees and public operating grants based on enrolment – are undercut. Moreover, proposals around stackable credentials and multi-institutional students raise fundamental organizational questions. For example, if a student is not

affiliated with any one institution, what degree granting body will issue her credential? What body would be responsible for evaluating previous learning? What incentive will universities have to deliver high quality programming, if another institution will award the credential? In addition to these unanswered questions, the discussion paper does not provide any evidence of student demand for this type of credential structure. In effect, the discussion paper is proposing a massive reorganization of the university sector without providing any insight into how such a system would be managed and supported; whether or not students actually want these credentials; and what, if any, benefits such a system would create.

Providing non-traditional students and lifelong learners with greater access to online courses, or improving the process by which credits can be transferred from one institution to another, can achieve the same goals of increased access and flexibility for students without requiring an overhaul of the entire university sector.

*Developing revitalized labour market-focused three-year degrees that could include specific experiential learning opportunities.*

Given Ontario's educational context, the benefit of a labour market-focused three-year degree is unclear. Many universities in Ontario already offer three-year degrees. However, they are so unpopular among students that some institutions have begun to phase out three-year degree options due to low enrolment. Ontario students already receive one less year of education at the secondary level following the

elimination of the OAC year in 2003. Students arriving at universities often require significant remediation in core academic skills, to the extent that in-depth learning is not possible until a student's fourth year of study. Removing another year of education by reducing the length of an undergraduate degree would not help students or the Ontario labour market, which increasingly needs more highly skilled workers with more education, not less. Third, a three-year degree would likely prevent graduates from pursuing further graduate or professional study in North America, where a four-year degree is the norm. In practice, these degrees would prove "terminal," effectively trapping graduates into a narrow range

of labour market opportunities. The limitations of a three-year degree given the educational context in Ontario must be recognized.

Moreover, interest in introducing a labour market-focused three-year degree raises some concerns given the Government of Ontario's record on directing university programming to meet labour market needs. Given the difficulty of predicting future economic and labour market trends, forecasts of future labour market demands are often inaccurate. This creates problems for students who graduate from programs that were promoted by government with the expectation that there would be significant demand for graduates in a particular field. For example, the Access to Opportunities Program (ATOP) sought to increase the number of computer science and technology graduates from Ontario's universities in response to significant growth in the high-tech sector in the late 1990s by

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directing significant public funding towards these programs. By the time the cohort of students brought in under ATOP graduated, however, the dot-com bubble had collapsed and the tech sector job market was dismal.

This proposal also raises the question of whether the model of education and training envisioned for a labour market-focused three-year program would even be most effectively delivered by universities. It may well be the case that the nature of a more labour market-focused program is better suited to the college context and could be more effectively delivered as a college diploma or other credential. As was recommended in Don Drummond's Report on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services, a clearer delineation of the purpose, mandate and function of colleges and universities in Ontario would provide a better sense of whether and where a labour market-focused post-secondary credential would be most appropriately delivered. Colleges are already explicitly labour market-focused, and are a logical home for this type of credential. The structure and content of a university degree should be preserved in order to provide clarity to students and employers.

*Exploring the creation of a credential supplement to facilitate labour market credential transferability between jurisdictions.*

Ontario degrees, as they currently exist, are already recognized throughout the world for both labour market and academic purposes. It is not clear what added benefit a government-issued credential supplement would provide. Creating a system of degree supplements in order to fulfill a need that either does not exist or is already being met by existing degree structures does not represent an effective use

of public funds. Ontario's faculty and academic librarians would prefer to see funding for post-secondary education directed at improving the quality of student experience than towards the establishment of a system of degree supplements that add little to student outcomes.

**Credit transfer**

Ontario's faculty and academic librarians recognize the importance of ensuring the transferability of university credits from one institution to another and agree that student mobility is a key component of a functional university sector. Credit transfer also improves flexibility and helps improve retention and graduation rates, which in turn delivers efficiencies to government when a student decides to change his or her program. To be effective, increased student mobility must be achieved in a way that respects institutional autonomy and academic freedom and ensures a high quality learning experience for students. For university to university transfers, decisions about credit transfer must be made at the institutional level, but better information should be made available to help students to navigate transfer structures. When it comes to college to university transfers, it is important to remember that Ontario's post-secondary education sector was designed in such a way that colleges and universities have wholly distinct mandates. Unlike the higher education systems in California or Alberta, Ontario's colleges are not designed to prepare students for direct transfer into university programs. Creating these articulation programs may be useful to a certain segment of potential students, but would represent a significant cost to government. A more cost-effective strategy is to encourage the greater use of bilateral

articulation agreements between a college and university, such as the longstanding and successful York-Seneca partnership.

*Make 100 per cent of first and second year introductory, general and core courses fully recognized across institutions.*

The establishment of first and second year courses that are recognized across all institutions in Ontario might indeed make the process of transferring credits from one institution to another more straightforward for students. However, there are unintended consequences of such a process that would undercut the core principles of a university – the very principles that make it possible for universities to be centres of research, discovery, creativity and innovation.

Making all first- and second-year courses fully recognized across all institutions throughout the province would result in – indeed, it would require –standardization of these courses. This standardization would undermine the ability of institutions, academic departments, and faculty members to set curriculum and to develop courses based on their specific strengths, areas of expertise and campus-specific student demand. Not only does this constitute an erosion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy; ultimately, it reduces student choice and works against the government’s stated aim of creating greater differentiation across Ontario’s universities.

There are better ways to simplify the university to university credit transfer process that do not require government intervention and do not undermine the foundational principles that underpin successful universities. For example, the recent agreement among seven of Ontario’s

universities to recognize specific course equivalencies for some first year courses<sup>7</sup> constitutes an institution-led arrangement that facilitates transfer while protecting institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

*Evaluate establishing a Bologna-compatible credential to improve international mobility of Ontario graduates.*

The Bologna Process seeks to ensure consistency of higher education programs and greater mobility of students within a European Higher Education Area. Among other initiatives, the Bologna Process establishes a three cycle higher education model (in which a three-year bachelor’s degree, two-year master’s degree and three-year doctorate is the standard), a shared qualifications framework, and a credit transfer system across 47 countries. The first round of agreements was signed in 1999, but implementation to date remains uneven and incomplete. Evaluation and analysis of the effectiveness and success of the model are only now beginning to occur and the results are not all positive. For example, reports from Germany indicate that students are unhappy with the three-year bachelor’s degree, claiming it does not give them enough time to cover the necessary material, fails to provide sufficient opportunity to raise money to fund their studies, and leads to over-crowded Master’s programs.<sup>8</sup> The heads of Germany’s higher

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<sup>7</sup> University Credit Transfer Consortium. (2012) Seven Ontario Universities Launch Sweeping Credit Transfer Initiative. Toronto: University Credit Transfer Consortium.  
<http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/1042119/seven-ontario-universities-launch-sweeping-credit-transfer-initiative>. Accessed September 25, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, D.G. (2012) German Universities 'Share Blame' for Problems. CITY: Spiegel Online.

education institutions have also noted that the three-year credential is “not turning out the graduates that industry really needs.”<sup>9</sup> Establishing Bologna-compatible credentials in Ontario would mean aligning Ontario higher education policy with an initiative that has yet to prove itself worthy of emulation.

The international mobility of Ontario graduates is already very strong. Currently, Ontario degrees are widely accepted by graduate programs throughout Canada, the United States, and the Commonwealth without any explicit alignment with Bologna requirements. Given that Ontario graduates are more likely to pursue graduate study in North America, there does not appear to be an immediate or urgent need to make changes to Ontario’s degree structures in order to ensure compatibility with European standards.

### Year-round programming

Most Ontario universities already offer summer courses, albeit on a reduced schedule. Interest in the expansion of year-round programming must recognize the cost and complexity of implementing year-round programming across the province. Given the increased human resource costs that would be associated with expanding year-round course offerings, this proposal would not help to contain costs throughout the sector. Rather than simply utilizing idle facilities to increase efficiency, this

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<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/press-review-on-bologna-process-education-reforms-a-850185.html>. Accessed September 25, 2012

<sup>9</sup> Gardner, M. (2012) Higher education heads criticise Bologna impact. United Kingdom: University World News.

<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120816130834727>

proposal would require significant investments in capacity.

Much of that capacity would come in the form of additional faculty who would need to be hired. The existing faculty complement could not meet the increased course instruction demands created by offering three full semesters of undergraduate course instruction per year. Faculty whose time is largely devoted to undergraduate teaching in the fall and winter terms must focus their summer semester on research, conference participation, and graduate student supervision. Far from lying dormant over the summer term, university campuses are busy with a different kind of academic activity from May through September as faculty and graduate students work to keep on top of developments in their field. Implementing year-round programming without accounting for faculty workload will seriously harm the research output of our institutions.

Some institutions, such as the University of Waterloo already operate on a year-round basis to accommodate their sizable co-op program – sixty per cent of the full-time undergraduate population at the University of Waterloo is enrolled in co-op.<sup>10</sup> However, co-op degree programs are more expensive to administer than a traditional program since they require year-round facilities, full-time teaching resources, and year-round support for administration. To offset this additional cost, Waterloo charges students a co-op fee.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Waterloo Co-operative Education. (2012) Why Co-op? Waterloo: University of Waterloo.

<http://www.ceca.uwaterloo.ca/students/prospectiv/e/> Accessed September 28, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Waterloo Co-operative Education. (2012) Admissions and Co-op Fee. Waterloo: University of Waterloo.

In traditional non-co-op programs, student demand for summer courses is lower due to a summer labour market that has evolved to provide more full-time work opportunities for students during that time. As tuition continues to rise, the ability to work full-time in the summer becomes increasingly important for students.

In order to increase student demand for year-round programming to a level that would make offering the summer courses worthwhile, financial incentives in the form of reduced tuition fees or greater availability of bursaries would need to be provided to students in order to make it feasible for students, already overburdened with debt, to give up four months of paid employment. The need for financial incentives as a way of attracting students to a summer semester was recognized by a University of California report that explored the feasibility of year-round instruction in the UC system.<sup>12</sup>

While there may be some flexibility benefits to implementing year-round programming at Ontario's universities, it is not a strategy that

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<https://uwaterloo.ca/co-operative-education/why-co-op/admissions-co-op-fee>. Accessed September 28, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> University of California. (2000) The Feasibility of Year-Round Instruction Within the University of California. Oakland: University of California.

<http://www.ucop.edu/planning/documents/yroundrpt2000.pdf>. Accessed September 20, 2012.

It must be noted that the establishment of year-round programming in the UC system was proposed as a way of accommodating a rapidly growing student population. This is not the same as Ontario's current challenge of finding productivity and efficiency increases in order to contain costs.

would achieve the government's current objectives of increased productivity and cost-containment.

### Quality teaching and learning outcomes


Ontario's professors and academic librarians are committed to improving the learning outcomes for Ontario's students, and have been since the

creation of the first provincial institutions. The discussion paper however, does not acknowledge the reality on the ground whereby teaching and learning quality are constrained by resource shortages and underfunding. Ontario has the highest student-to-faculty ratio in the

country (28:1), resulting in larger class sizes, fewer choices and less student-faculty interaction. While the measurement of student outcomes is an important part of ensuring educational quality, what we really need are concrete strategies for improving student success. An essential means to better outcomes is the hiring of additional full-time faculty. A more expansive discussion around learning outcomes – one that acknowledges the detrimental effects of under-funding and high student-to-faculty ratios – will enable government to identify and make the necessary investments for achieving its quality aims.

### *How heavy a weight could learning outcomes have in a renewed funding formula?*

Under no circumstances should learning outcomes have any bearing on the way in which Ontario's universities are funded. The formula



*Teaching and learning quality are constrained by resource shortages and underfunding.*



according to which operating grants and other funding are allocated can always be improved in order to increase equity and better reflect the cost of delivering higher education. For example, the way in which the basic income unit (BIU) is calculated could be restructured as a multiplier that attaches a set amount of funding per FTE, rather than as divider that simply divides a set pool of funding amongst institutions based on FTE enrolment. Any adjustment to how funding is allocated must accept that public funding has to put students first. We must always fund students rather than government priorities.

Attaching eligibility for core funding to learning outcomes or other benchmarks – and withholding that funding if targets are not met – is counterproductive. If an institution fails to meet a certain government target, clawing back funding is not going to help that institution to meet its targets in the future – in fact, quite the opposite. It will render already struggling institutions unable to make improvements by depriving them of the resources they would need to do so. Ultimately, the effect of this kind of a funding structure would be to penalize the students at any institution that fails to meet whatever target is imposed.

It is also important to recognize that quality measurement, and any punitive measures that accompany this measurement, is not the same thing as *quality*. Measuring quality does not, in and of itself, improve quality. Nor does rewarding or punishing institutions that fail to meet certain (and often, arbitrary) benchmarks. Quality improvement is a continuous process of collaboration between government, institutions, faculty, and students, and involves not only questions of pedagogy but also of infrastructure and funding.

Given the significant danger to the quality of Ontario's universities associated with allocating funding on the basis of output measures, these measures should only be used for supporting institutional improvement.

*Consider more widespread implementation of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) or other similar assessment tools to measure the achievement of desired learning outcomes and skills.*

Tools already exist in Ontario for benchmarking and monitoring of learning outcomes and skills for both undergraduate and graduate programs in Ontario. Guidelines for Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UDLEs) and Graduate Degree Level Expectations (GDLEs) were established by the Council of Ontario Universities in 2005. These guidelines cover six key categories including depth and breadth of knowledge, knowledge of methodologies, application of knowledge, communication skills, awareness of limits of knowledge, and autonomy and professional capacity.<sup>13</sup> These guidelines are used as a threshold framework by Ontario's universities against which all programs are evaluated on an ongoing basis. Any measurement of outcomes and strategies for improvement should be grounded in these guidelines and must occur at the institutional level.

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<sup>13</sup> Council of Ontario Universities. (2007) Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) Guidelines for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations. Toronto: Council of Ontario Universities  
<http://www.cou.on.ca/publications/reports/pdfs/university-undergraduate-degree-level-expectations> . Accessed September 25, 2012.

The CLA compares a group of first-year students with a group of fourth-year students simultaneously, controlling for Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) scores. This is thought to demonstrate how much change occurs in typical students over the course of a degree program. Given that Ontario has no equivalent for the SAT or ACT, there would be no way to control for academic ability in the Ontario context. This creates significant methodological limitations. Moreover, the CLA was not designed to be used as a system-level performance indicator. Rather, it is intended to provide an institution with information on the impact the institution has had on a particular group of students. For these reasons, we do not believe the CLA or similar standardized tests to be effective ways of monitoring institutional quality in the Ontario context.

*Consider more flexible provisions for the teaching and research balance for faculty.*

Flexibility around teaching and research balance already exists in faculty collective agreements, and the allocation of faculty time is not rigidly mandated. Only four collective agreements in the province lay out hard percentages around how a faculty member's time should be divided between teaching, research and service.<sup>14</sup> Even in these four agreements, it is explicitly stated that faculty members can adjust the way in which their time is distributed in consultation with a dean or department chair.

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<sup>14</sup> Brock University, University of Guelph and Laurentian University use a distribution of 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% service as a guideline. Carleton University uses 50% teaching, 35% research and 15% service as a guideline.

There are other incentives in the university system that drive faculty to certain areas of activity over others. For the past two decades, pervasive underfunding of Ontario's universities has forced university administrators to seek out additional sources of revenue. In most cases, this additional funding has been in the form of research dollars. As a result, research has been given a high priority at many institutions. However, OCUFA's recent faculty survey found that professors value research and teaching equally.<sup>15</sup> In many cases, however, the promotion and tenure process is structured in such a way that faculty are required to demonstrate significant research activity through publications in order to be able to advance through the ranks. If these incentives were removed, faculty would be free to pursue their strengths and interests, either in teaching or research.

The proposal seems to suggest that if faculty devoted more time to teaching, we could achieve better learning outcomes for students. Independent of how a faculty member divides his or her time, the fundamental interconnectedness of research and teaching must be preserved for every faculty member. Scholarship – understood as the discovery of new knowledge, the critical analysis of existing knowledge and the communication of these insights to students and the public – is at the heart of what a university is and does. It relies upon the preservation of the link between

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<sup>15</sup> Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. (2012) 2012 OCUFA Faculty Survey Part 1 – Views on University Quality and Faculty Priorities. Toronto: Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. <http://ocufa.on.ca/wordpress/assets/2012-OCUFA-Faculty-Survey-Part-1-Formatted-FINAL.pdf> . Accessed September 26, 2012.

research and teaching and without it, we cannot deliver the education that students expect and deserve. Ultimately, when it comes to teaching and research, it is not a question of choosing one over another. It is about how best to balance teaching and research – at the individual, program, and institutional levels – to ensure best results for students, faculty, and the province.

*Encourage the establishment of teaching and learning centres to promote and support a culture of teaching.*

Teaching and learning centres already exist at almost every Ontario university. They are important centres of professional development and Ontario's faculty and academic librarians would fully support a government initiative to provide additional resources for these centres through targeted funding.

**Technology enabled learning**

Learning technology and online delivery are used extensively by Ontario's faculty to enhance student learning. Online learning, however, must not be seen as a panacea to the challenges faced by Ontario's universities. While online learning can indeed be a powerful and useful supplement to the traditional classroom experience, it should never be seen as a viable replacement. There is no substitute for face-to-face classroom interaction and the kind of intellectual community that can only be created in that context.

For certain groups of students who are unable to access the traditional face-to-face learning environment, we must ensure that Ontario's online learning options are supportive of their needs and of high quality. Online learning can

be an effective way to increase flexibility and access for traditionally under-represented groups. However, to achieve best results for these students, online learning should not be seen as a way to cut costs but as a way to expand the opportunities for students within the university sector.

Shifting more and more courses online will not result in massive cost savings for institutions. More importantly, increased use of online education simply for the sake of accommodating more students in an already resource-constrained sector will have a negative impact on students and on Ontario's universities, especially if no additional funding is made available to support this initiative. Expansion of quality online education would require significant new investment to establish and extensive resources to maintain and support.

*Revamping the vision for the Online Institute to provide Ontario students with online degree and diploma options to serve students who prefer to learn online, lifelong learners, and students with dependents who are unable to easily attend physical campuses/How could a degree- and diploma-granting Ontario Online Institute interface with existing institutions?*

Degree-granting requires a certain kind of infrastructure. It needs an academic senate, empowered to make decisions regarding program and course structure; it needs to be integrated into provincial quality assurance mechanisms; and it needs a complement of academic staff to design courses, evaluate prior learning, and provide leadership.

Absent these features, the Ontario Online Institute (OOI) should not be given degree-

granting authority. Without the structure of an independent institution, it would be unable to ensure quality and properly award credentials to its students.

Practically, tasking the OOI with recognizing courses taken from a variety of institutions would be administratively burdensome. As an aggregator of courses from universities across the province, the ability of the OOI to assess – much less provide – a coherent program of study would be extremely limited, resulting in a diminished student experience and a credential of questionable value. Academic departments in universities plan rational curricula designed to meet defined learning outcomes. These objectives rightly differ between programs and institutions. Attempting to reconcile courses from across the province would be difficult, and even more so without a large (and expensive) bureaucracy.

The OOI was originally envisioned as a portal for sharing resources, information and best-practices in online education. Significant investments have been made to make this original vision a ready-to-launch reality. Ontario's faculty support this version of the OOI as a resource that allows students to access online courses offered by existing universities and provides faculty with resources to support them in the development of online pedagogy.

It should also be noted that the idea of conferring degree-granting status on the OOI was rejected by the majority of consultation roundtable participants.

### *More widespread use of technology in the classroom.*

Ontario's faculty and academic librarians use technology in the classroom in order to enhance student learning and welcome new opportunities to develop new and innovative technology-enabled pedagogical tools. Faculty know what works in their classrooms. As such, the adoption of learning technology must not be forced upon faculty from above either by administrators or government. In order to encourage increased use of technology in the classroom, the resources and infrastructure needed to experiment with and adopt new technology must be made available to faculty. They can then develop appropriate classroom uses for this technology commensurate with their needs and the needs of students.

### **Experiential and entrepreneurial learning**

Experiential and entrepreneurial learning are an important part of the range of opportunities available to students at Ontario's universities. That being said, many, if not most, university students are not interested in becoming entrepreneurs, and labour market preparation is not the only goal of a university education. Moreover, many students may not wish to pursue an experiential opportunity. Therefore, while it should remain an important educational option, experiential and entrepreneurial learning should not be given precedence over other types of programming which serve many different student populations.

Any expansion of university ties with the private sector for the sake of experiential learning must respect academic freedom. This fundamental principle must not be sacrificed to produce new

partnerships. Moreover, experiential learning must not be limited to opportunities in the private sector. Links should also be established between institutions and the public and not-for-profit sectors in order to encourage social entrepreneurship and the kind of innovation that benefits communities.

As with online and technology-enabled learning, faculty must have access to the resources, tools and infrastructure they would need in order to

effectively incorporate experiential learning approaches into their teaching. Faculty are in the best position to determine which approaches and opportunities work best for their students. Imposing a particular vision of experiential learning on faculty will harm academic freedom and distort the student experience.

## Implications For the Sector

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Taken to their furthest extreme, the ideas, concepts, and proposals contained within the discussion paper would lead to an unprecedented government intrusion into academic decision-making and would seriously impair academic freedom within Ontario's universities. Such an intrusion would be unacceptable, and would seriously damage the sector. Recent history is littered with examples of well-meaning government attempts to interfere with academic decision-making. In addition to the ATOP example noted above, the government lowered medical school enrolment in the early 1990s, in the anticipation of lower demand. A decade later, Ontarians were faced with a shortage of doctors. These were relatively small programs; the kinds of interventions suggested by the discussion paper could have much larger, and far-reaching, consequences.

It is important to note that the government will need the cooperation of faculty and university staff to implement any effective reform program. It is therefore curious that, just as the consultation process is set to end, the Government of Ontario should seek to pass legislation that attacks the fundamental rights of these groups. The proposed anti-labour legislation brought forward by the government will create an environment of distrust and hostility on Ontario's campuses, and will make any reform program difficult to implement.

OCUFA and its members are willing to work with any government that is serious about improving the quality of Ontario's universities. In order for cooperation to be successful, however, an environment of genuine respect and consultation is necessary. We are deeply concerned that the Government of Ontario is undermining the possibilities of collaboration just when we need collaboration most.

OCUFA proposes that the Government of Ontario take a step back from the discussion paper. In collaboration with stakeholders, MTCU should reframe the assumptions contained within the existing document and begin a long-term co-operative project to improve quality, enhance student success, and ensure the viability of our institutions for decades to come. While we do not believe that the higher education sector can be re-designed in a few short months, we do believe that a

vibrant, well-funded university sector can be grown through careful research, realistic goals, and meaningful partnership.

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