



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

OCUFA SUBMISSION

College Master's Degrees in Applied Areas of Study: An Ill-Conceived Plan

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Introduction

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities is proposing a regulatory amendment that would allow the Minister of Colleges and Universities the authority to grant Ontario's public colleges that "meet certain conditions" the ability to offer applied master's degrees in applied areas of study.

Lack of clarity in the proposed regulatory change

OCUFA is concerned about the lack of definitions and clarity in the proposed regulatory change. The proposal says that "this proposed regulatory amendment would set out conditions that must be met for a college" to be permitted to offer applied master's degrees, without clarifying these parameters or conditions. Moreover, the proposal says that the applied master's degrees offered by colleges would focus on "applied study and applied research" and "contain applied elements like work-integrated learning opportunities" and are "different from master's degree programs in the university system." The regulatory proposal, however, does not clarify how these master's degrees would be differentiated from those offered in the university system; nor does it address that in the university system, one needs to complete an undergrad bachelor's degree in order to pursue a master's degree; nor does indicate how these would be different from diploma or certificate programs already offered by public colleges and universities in Ontario. This is especially concerning because applied study, applied research, and work-integrated learning are already components of many of the master's degree programs currently offered by public universities in Ontario, and would simply create degree confusion for employers, and certifying and professional bodies, thus negatively impacting student job prospects.

The regulatory proposal says the objective of this change is to "produce graduates in key sectors with the targeted skill sets that employers are looking for" and to "offer students new choices" of graduate programs in Ontario. The proposal for applied master's degree blurs these lines and prompts many questions, including: How will applied master's degrees offered by colleges be differentiated from master's degrees that are currently offered by Ontario's universities that provide research-based, experiential and hands-on learning? What will these degrees do to meet labour market

needs that university master's degrees that provide a high-quality, well-rounded education that prepares today's students for today's jobs and the jobs of tomorrow aren't providing? Why introduce a new graduate program system instead of supporting and growing existing ones? It would be crucially important for the Ministry to provide these details before undertaking creation and funding of a new program.

A crisis of underfunding

OCUFA strongly believes that adequately funding postsecondary education in Ontario is a prerequisite for evaluating the suitability of colleges to grant applied master's degrees. However, the government has made it clear that no additional funding for postsecondary education would be forthcoming. The current proposal to allow colleges to grant applied master's degrees is presented under the slogan of providing 'more choice' to students and employers, but the Ontario government has not clarified how the current proposal will give more choice in the context of chronic underfunding of postsecondary education. With no added funding or plans to expand or even protect existing graduate programs at universities, creating new applied master's degrees at colleges would be irresponsible and would not serve students, faculty, or prospective employers.

In the current landscape of underfunding, this proposed change is hastily introduced, thus lacking a framework, and it is uncertain from where the proposal to have colleges offer applied master's degree has arisen from, especially since universities are well positioned to provide graduate degrees. Students in university graduate programs are currently learning job-ready skills and getting access to work experience. They have access to labs, experiential learning, research positions, and mentorship opportunities. The proposal to allow colleges to grant applied master's degrees—with no plan to fund such programs in short-term, much less long term—is another unnecessary and likely wasteful measure and an attempt to de-skill Ontario's workforce.

Postsecondary institutions in Ontario are facing a manufactured crisis resulting from more than a decade of underfunding by successive governments. Universities in Ontario receive the lowest per-domestic-student funding in Canada—by a huge margin. In 2021-22, Ontario provided \$9,890 in total university funding per domestic full-time student, the most recent year for which there is comprehensive data. This is a total far behind the national average of \$15,807. Ontario's public universities receive less than a quarter (24%) of their funding from the Ontario government. The average in the rest of Canada is over a third (35%).

The lack of stable public funding has driven universities towards short-term cost-saving measures, including the reliance on contract faculty, aggressive international student recruitment (often without appropriate support and resources for those students), skyrocketing fees, the undervaluing of important university programs through program pauses and cancellations, and an increasing reliance on private funds. This is undermining long-term planning and investments that are needed to support Ontario's world-class public universities.

As a result, looking at data for tenure and tenure-track faculty, Ontario has the highest student-to-faculty ratio in Canada. As of 2021-22, there were 34 students for every full-time faculty member at an Ontario university, compared to an average of 23 students for each university faculty member across the rest of Canada. These trends hurt teaching and learning in Ontario. Having more students and fewer professors leads to substantially larger class sizes, less one-on-one engagement, and fewer opportunities for mentorship and academic advising. Large class sizes and limited options for academic mentorship are anathema to quality graduate education. Further, the government-appointed Blue Ribbon Panel has found that faculty in Ontario are not being overly compensated as compared to almost every other province – quite the opposite: faculty salaries at Ontario’s universities are lower than other provinces.

This is why OCUFA has asked the Ontario government to increase its per-student funding by 11.75 percent compounded for the next five years to move Ontario from last place to reach the Canadian average.

The government is already underserving postsecondary students by underfunding the sector. Without increasing funding to postsecondary institutions in Ontario to reach the Canadian average and addressing existing issues including fairness for contract faculty, exploding class sizes, and program pauses and cancellations, it is not prudent, and likely costly, for the Ontario government to introduce this regulatory change.

The value of a university degree and the importance of collegial governance

There are numerous ways in which universities contribute to Ontario’s economy and culture.

Economically, universities are key contributors to growth. The [Conference Board of Canada estimates](#) that public investment in university education boosts Ontario’s gross domestic product (GDP) by approximately \$96 billion per year. Research and development, driven by Ontario’s universities, has boosted Ontario’s GDP by another \$30 billion. In addition, the Conference Board of Canada estimates that every \$1 invested in postsecondary education generates a positive economic return of \$1.36 — nearly a 40 percent return on investment.¹

Beyond positive economic impacts, there are many other benefits gained from a university education, and positive ripple effects of a university education can be found throughout Canadian society.

¹ Conference Board of Canada, *How Ontario Universities Benefit Regional Economies: Assessing the Regional Economic Impacts of Universities in Ontario*, 2021, <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/how-ontario-universities-benefit-regional-economies-assessing-the-regional-economic-impacts-of-universities-in-ontario/>.

For example, university graduates have [better health outcomes](#),² which relieves pressure off governmental health spending. University graduates are also [more engaged citizens](#).³

Furthermore, Ontario's universities produce thinkers—be they learners, educators, entrepreneurs, innovators, or researchers—with the skills and flexibility to address a changing economy and society. It is this nimbleness that allows Ontario's universities to meet the province's current and future skills gaps and enhance productivity. This is especially important in today's changing economy, where 75 percent of new job growth is [estimated](#) to require a postsecondary education, making a university degree the new standard.⁴ Simply put, universities prepare today's students for tomorrow's jobs—many of which do not yet exist.

The myriad benefits of a university degree are made possible through guarantees of academic freedom and collegial governance models at universities, which are internationally recognized as the standard for providing quality postsecondary education. Collegial governance is the system of shared governance at universities where administrators, faculty and students make joint decisions about the delivery and development of degree programs at each institution. This is a key point that distinguishes Ontario's public universities from Ontario's public colleges and is especially important as faculty are experts in their fields and their active participation in the visioning, development and implementation of academic programs are vital to program success and quality.

The absence of collegial governance at Ontario's cherished public colleges precludes them from delivering graduate degrees that fit this global standard of quality graduate education. Further, it risks misleading students who enroll in graduate programs at colleges about the value and transferability of these degrees when measured against this international standard. From the perspective of faculty who research and teach at Ontario's world-class public universities, we are concerned that permitting colleges in Ontario to offer applied master's degrees in the absence of collegial governance will have the effect of undermining collegial governance and quality assurance in the sector as a whole. This does a disservice to all stakeholders in the postsecondary sector. It would falsely signal that collegial governance and faculty expertise is not necessary for the development and provision of graduate-level programs, in defiance of the internationally- recognized standards on this issue.

² Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, "Education as a Social Determinant of Health," 2021, <https://publichealth.tulane.edu/blog/social-determinant-of-health-education-is-crucial/>.

³ Egerton, M. "Higher education and civic engagement," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 53: 603-620, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131022000021506>.

⁴ Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS), *Imbalances Between Labour Demand and Supply (2019-2028)*, <https://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/content.jsp?cid=52&lang=en>.

College and University degrees are not interchangeable: nursing degrees as an example

While Ontario's colleges provide an invaluable education to their students, a university education is neither synonymous nor interchangeable with a college education. In the case of nursing degrees, for example, lives can be at stake. Currently, Ontario permits colleges to offer stand-alone college degrees, but there is ample evidence that suggests that the proportion of nurses holding a university bachelor's degree positively impacts the quality of care for patients and results in reduced mortality rates.^{5 6}

Nursing degrees awarded by universities as research institutions or jointly between colleges and universities ensure that graduating students have a well-rounded, research-based education. This gives graduating nurses the research, scientific and technical skills they need to serve their patients, work with university-trained doctors, and keep up with the ever-changing landscape of medicine; indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown the need for research, critical thinking, and innovation skills provided by university-level education. In this case, treating college and university degrees as interchangeable is not in the public interest and can be dangerous.

OCUFA is concerned that cost-generating measures like granting colleges the ability to offer applied master's degrees, will, in effect, not only not help students but also have long-lasting, harmful impacts. These unnecessary measures will result in the de-skilling of Ontario's workforce through falsely equating university and college degrees. Furthermore, it risks making graduates of these programs more vulnerable to labour market fluctuations in the medium and long term.

Conclusion

OCUFA opposes the current regulatory proposal. OCUFA believes there is no demonstrated need, and no consultation, that we are aware of, has raised the need for colleges to offer applied master's degrees in Ontario.

In the context of chronic underfunding of postsecondary education in Ontario and given the lack of detail provided in the proposal, the absence of collegial governance at colleges and the prominent differences between college and university degrees, it would not be prudent for the Ontario government to implement this proposed change.

While the current model of graduate study in Ontario is not without its challenges that require the government's attention and funding, but adding new graduate programs that mimic or duplicate programs at the university level, albeit with less quality assurance and faculty input, does not address existing issues in postsecondary education, especially in the current landscape of chronic underfunding.

We believe that the success of all academic programs, including new ones, is reliant upon adequately and publicly funded postsecondary institutions, and maintaining robust

⁵ Nurse staffing, nursing assistants and hospital mortality: retrospective longitudinal cohort study (2019) <https://qualitysafety.bmj.com/content/28/8/609>

⁶ Post-operative mortality, missed care and nurse staffing in nine countries: A cross-sectional study (2018) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28844649/>

and internationally recognized standards. Stable, consistent, and adequate base funding for Ontario's postsecondary institutions allows them to make long-term plans and focus on their core mandates of research and teaching. We urge the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to increase core funding for postsecondary education to match the Canadian average as a starting point for evaluating this and any other new proposals in the postsecondary sector.