

Platform Analysis

Ontario PC Party

OCUFA

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

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING PARTY PLATFORMS

Over the course of the election campaign, all of the major parties will present their vision for the future of the province through their election platforms. In order to assess the impact of what each party is proposing for university professors and academic librarians, and for the higher education sector more broadly, OCUFA has developed a set of criteria for assessment. When it comes to higher education, the ideal platform would:

- Increase per-student funding to bring it in line with the national average, allowing institutions to pursue their core functions – teaching and research – free of financial strain;
- Provide funding to hire adequate faculty to bring the student-faculty ratio in Ontario in line with the national average, while addressing the increasing precarity of academic work;
- Introduce measures to control the cost and ensure the accessibility of high quality higher education for students;
- Protect the collective bargaining rights of faculty and faculty associations across Ontario;
- Provide the legislative space for the university sector to develop pension solutions that will ensure the fairness and long-term sustainability of pension plans in the sector

The Ontario PC Party's election platform falls short on all five indicators, with proposals that would counter the goals outlined above.

FUNDING AND FACULTY HIRING

The policy proposals outlined in the Ontario PC Party platform would have a detrimental effect on the need for increased per-student funding for universities and increased faculty hiring.

Ontario PC leader Tim Hudak's promise to cut 100,000 jobs in the broader public sector would likely be implemented through significant overall cuts to government operating grants for the university sector, since the provincial government does not have the authority to cut jobs in

universities directly. Reductions to university funding would have the effect of necessitating faculty and staff lay-offs, which would in turn drive up class sizes and compromise educational quality.

In addition to policy proposals that would work against the goals of bringing per-student funding and the student-faculty ratio in line with the national average, the broad vision for higher education laid out in the Ontario PC Party platform is a narrow and limited one. Universities are presented exclusively as institutions designed to link students with the workplace – either as job-ready graduates or entrepreneurs. Universities play an important economic role, but are also centres of knowledge creation, where students learn to think critically and faculty engage in scholarship and discovery. They prepare students for the workplace, but also for active and engaged citizenship. Failure to acknowledge the full range and complexity of what a university is and does is misguided.

Moreover, the Ontario PC Party platform's insistence that there be "a renewed emphasis on the quality and quantity of university teaching" signals an unsettling willingness of a hypothetical PC government to intervene in academic decision making and the determination of faculty workloads and faculty distribution of work time and effort. The platform's focus on teaching, to the exclusion of research and service, fails to capture the full scope of what a university is and does.

Overall, the Ontario PC Party platform's proposals would drastically reduce funding for universities, limit institutions' ability to hire more full-time faculty and would narrow the vision of what a university is and does – all limiting the ability of our province's universities to deliver a high quality post-secondary education for students.

AFFORDABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

When it comes to the accessibility and affordability of higher education, the Ontario PC Party platform promises that no student would be denied access to higher education because of a lack of money.

However, their February 2013 white paper on higher education called for the creation of different tiers of higher education, offering varying levels of quality, based on students' ability to pay (with free online courses that wouldn't provide a credential at one end of the spectrum, and elite, high performing institutions that would charge "market rate" tuition at the other).

This model would indeed ensure that no student is denied access to higher education, but the quality of the educational experience from one end of the spectrum to the other would vary drastically.

Moreover, the student financial assistance proposals outlined in the same white paper called for the elimination of the 30 per cent off tuition grant, a proposal also that Hudak has reiterated more recently. Ontario's tuition fees are the highest in Canada at \$7,259 for the average undergraduate degree. The elimination of a program that currently provides tuition relief for some middle- and low-income students would have a detrimental impact on the affordability of higher education.

Additionally, the PC higher education white paper proposed the establishment of more stringent eligibility requirements for government loans, requiring students to demonstrate future employability or academic excellence in order to access provincial student assistance.

Overall, the Ontario PC Party platform's proposals would limit students' ability to access a high quality and affordable higher education.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS

When it comes to labour policies, the Ontario PC Party platform promises a series of initiatives that echo the proposals laid out in their June 2012 white paper on labour laws, including the imposition of onerous financial disclosure requirements, the implementation of certification by secret ballot, and the elimination of the Rand formula and automatic dues check off.

The platform's proposal to ensure that certification can only occur by secret ballot mirrors legislation that was introduced federally – bill C-525. Like the federal bill, this proposal would do nothing to protect employee secrecy, would be contrary to established representation procedures, would disregard employee choice, and would promote decertification of bargaining units.

Similarly, the proposal that labour organizations be required to be transparent with detailed financial information is similar to legislation that was first introduced at the federal level in 2012 and would have required public disclosure of financial information by unions and other associations representing employees. During Senate debate on the federal bill C-377, there was

overwhelming opposition to the bill, which was seen as unnecessary, discriminatory, invasive and likely unconstitutional. Attempts to impose similar requirements at the provincial level would be equally problematic. Moreover, the proposal that insists that disclosure is needed to ensure that union members need to know how their dues are being spent, fails to acknowledge that as open and democratic organizations, employee groups already make this information available to their members.

Finally, the Ontario PC Party platform's promise to implement "paycheque protection so that workers are not forced to pay fees towards political causes they don't support" is reminiscent of Hudak's previous proposals to allow workers to opt out of paying union dues. In the Ontario PC Party's June 2012 white paper on labour relations, the party insisted that "no clauses in any provincial legislation, regulation or collective agreement should require a worker to become a member of a union or pay union dues as a condition of employment." The elimination of the Rand formula and automatic dues check off promised in the 2012 white paper would create an enormous free rider problem within employee associations and would devastate unions' ability to negotiate fair agreements and advocate for their members. Hudak has since backed away from this policy position following public outcry, but the platform's promise of "paycheque protection" signals a continued willingness to restrict the ability of unions and other employee associations to collect fees from employees to support operations according to democratically established goals.

In addition to job cuts, funding reductions, and anti-worker labour policies, the Ontario PC Party platform promises to implement a pay freeze – through legislation if necessary – for all broader public sector workers, including those in universities. Wage freeze legislation would open up the more than 4,000 collective agreements in the BPS and override the collectively bargained wage provisions outlined therein. This proposal represents an unwarranted attack on and intrusion into the rights of faculty and faculty associations as well as all other BPS employees who bargain collectively. When the government of British Columbia imposed legislation that overruled collective agreement provisions for health care workers in that province, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the legislation was unconstitutional.

Overall, the Ontario PC Party platform's proposals relating to labour and collective bargaining rights, if implemented, would bring about some of the most regressive and anti-worker policies and laws this province has ever seen. These policy changes would threaten the ability of labour organizations, including faculty associations, to advocate for fair working conditions and the rights of their members and indeed would threaten their continued existence.

PENSIONS

Far from allowing the university sector (and other broader public sector groups) to develop pension solutions that will ensure the fairness and long-term sustainability of pension plans that make sense for the sector, the Ontario PC Party platform proposes the dismantling of broader public sector pension plans altogether. The platform promises that new BPS employees would only have access to defined contribution pension plans. Past service benefits earned by current employees would be protected, but any future pension earnings would be directed to a defined contribution plan.

Overall, the Ontario PC Party platform's proposals on pensions would impose a government pension 'solution' on all broader public sector workers that would limit their ability to save for a predictable and secure retirement and override the rights of employees and employers to negotiate the terms of their pension plans locally.