

**Ensuring Quality:  
Perspectives of a University President and COU Chair**

OCUFA Conference  
*Ensuring Quality and Affordability in Ontario Universities:  
The Path Best Taken*

Remarks by

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For Panel 4: Ensuring Quality

January 21, 2005

**INITIAL DRAFT January 15, 2005**

Good afternoon. Thank you, Marissa, for the introduction and for moderating this panel. It is a pleasure and an honour to be asked to participate in this conference and on the panel on Ensuring Quality. I want to thank Michael Doucet and all of OCUFA for organizing such an important and timely event. Quality and affordability in Ontario universities needs to become an important part of the public policy debate in this province. Events like this one help ensure that these issues remain at the forefront of discussion, and that as the date approaches for the release of Bob Rae's report on Postsecondary Education, the university community is able to respond quickly, decisively, and, we hope, positively, to his recommendations.

I want to acknowledge my fellow panelists, Ron Saunders and Ann Dowsett Johnston, for the efforts of their organizations in keeping these issues before the public. Given my university's history with the Maclean's ratings, you might think that I would be ambivalent about sharing a podium with their perpetrator, but I would like to say, Ann, that your personal efforts in working with the university community to generate proxies for quality are appreciated.

"Ensuring Quality": you could not have asked me to discuss any topic that is closer to my heart or more important to the Council of Ontario Universities. This topic was the focus of 15 months of deliberations by COU's Quality and Financing Task Force, led by Peter George, President of McMaster University. The work of the Task Force shaped COU's submission to the Rae Review. How to ensure quality and how to finance quality are among the major challenges facing universities around the world, and we are fortunate to have had so astute a person as Bob Rae to lead the consultation on these issues here in Ontario.

What did COU tell Mr. Rae about quality? First, we can start with what Mr. Rae himself said in his Discussion Paper, and I quote: *I think education is the bedrock of modern society. I also think that our system of higher education in Ontario is in serious jeopardy . . . The level of public and private support is insufficient to keep Ontario as strong, competitive and socially advanced as we want to be.*

Clearly, there was a receptive environment for COU to present arguments to Mr. Rae about the serious consequences of under-investment in universities over the past two decades. There is no mystery as to what defines “university quality” or how to achieve it. Commonly accepted indicators of quality include:

- low faculty-student ratios
- a wide choice of courses and programs
- well-equipped, up-to-date laboratories and classrooms
- well-stocked libraries that make use of leading-edge technology
- adequate support staff and services, and
- well-maintained facilities.

All these conditions work together to create the type of learning and research environment that will ensure that our graduates are highly skilled and can contribute to Ontario’s economic and social development. But when we look at what our students are experiencing and we compare it to other jurisdictions, particularly the American states that are our economic comparators (as carefully defined and documented by the Task Force on Competitiveness, Productivity and

Economic Progress – the “Roger Martin Task Force”), we can see that there are serious problems. No university president wants to have to admit that his or her university is not providing a quality education to its students, but we have to acknowledge the impact of underfunding on our campuses:

- ***a student-faculty ratio*** that is the highest in Canada, having increased to 24-to-1 from 19-to-1 a decade ago. The average ratios are 35 per cent better in peer institutions in the United States, and 16 per cent better in the rest of Canada.
- ***campus facilities*** that are in desperate need of renewal, with 78 per cent of university buildings over 30 years old, which is considered the average life cycle of a building. A systematic audit of facilities identified that almost 50 per cent of audited buildings are considered to be in poor condition, and overall, the deferred maintenance problem is estimated at \$1.5 billion. The impact of deferred maintenance on the quality of the educational experience is well documented, including the disruption of educational activities, the impact of the failure of major building components, and the threat to health and safety created by hazardous and unsafe conditions.
- ***graduate enrolment levels*** that lag substantially behind American levels and have been identified (by the Roger Marin Task Force) as a contributing factor to the prosperity gap between Ontario and peer states.
- ***research capacity*** that has benefited considerably from federal and provincial investments in recent years but which requires further funding for research operating, infrastructure, and indirect costs, to ensure that Ontario universities remain competitive.

The COU submission to the Rae Review made several recommendations for ensuring the Ontario students have access to a high quality learning experience. It must be understood, however, that the commitment of Ontario universities to accessibility and to quality is not new. For several years COU has premised its discussions with government on five shared goals:

- All appropriately qualified Ontario students will have access to a place in an Ontario university.
- No student will be denied access to the program of his or her choice for financial reasons.
- The education received by Ontario university students will be the best in Canada and on par with that offered in the best public universities worldwide.
- Research support will enable Ontario's faculty and students to add valuable knowledge and produce economic and societal benefits to all Ontario residents such that the province secures a reputation for excellence in both its scientific/medical and its humanities/social sciences research.
- The physical environment of Ontario universities will be safe, up-to-date, accessible to those with special needs, and will enhance the learning effectiveness of each student's educational experience.

COU's recommendations to the Rae Review support these goals and ask government to

1. Provide a robust student financial assistance program to help ensure financial access for all students and restore flexibility in tuition setting;
2. Fund all eligible graduate and undergraduate students;

3. Increase operating grants to the average funding per student in the other nine provinces, and fund annual increases in operating costs;
4. Double graduate enrolment by 2013, and fully fund that growth and related capital requirements;
5. Address capital requirements and deferred maintenance to restore university buildings;
6. Invest to keep Ontario university research competitive.

I will not go into all the details of the recommendations, but I would note that the estimated incremental increase in operating grants needed to bring Ontario universities to the per-student income level of the other nine provinces is \$1 billion over three years. This amount would also help close the substantial revenue gap between Ontario universities and public universities in the United States. I encourage you to review COU's report, *A Vision for Excellence* (available on the COU website) and to go to the websites of the individual universities to review their submissions. You'll see reflected in them a strong commitment to students, to excellence, and to the future of this province and country. There is no suggestion in any of the material that our requests for significant additional funding reflect a sense of entitlement, but rather, the deeply-felt commitment that excellence in university education is essential to the future well-being of this province and its citizens, and must be funded.

There is a danger that our emphasis on the need for increased funding for quality will obscure the fact that Ontario universities are already world-leaders in ensuring program quality. Indeed, through the efforts of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS), Ontario has one of the most rigorous processes in place world-wide for the introduction of new graduate programs and the appraisal

of ongoing graduate programs. In addition, we are now in the second phase of a cycle of comprehensive audits of institutional policies and processes for undergraduate program quality assurance. The audits are conducted under the auspices of the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV).

Both the undergraduate and graduate processes were put in place by Ontario universities operating in the collective, not by government, although government does rely on the results of the graduate program approval process in making decisions to fund graduate programs.

The OCGS process is an outstanding example of academic self-regulation, as the publicly-assisted universities of Ontario are bound they will not implement a new master's or doctoral program unless and until it has been appraised by OCGS and found to be of good quality. Thereafter, all existing graduate programs are re-appraised on a seven-year cycle, and any program found to be not of good quality must cease operation. Given that most graduate programs are of good quality, the periodic appraisal process not only provides public assurance and accountability of that fact, but it provides the occasion for self-assessment and feedback from external consultants and the Appraisal Committee aimed at continuous quality improvement.

The OCGS appraisal process incorporates elements that are generally accepted throughout the world as essential to effective quality assurance processes, including:

- self-study or self appraisal by the members of the program, with the specific elements of the self-study defined by OCGS by-laws
- peer review by external reviewers, who conduct and report on a site visit

- a decision made by an external body – in this case the OCGS Appraisal Committee – as to the quality of the program and the necessary remedial action.

For the undergraduate process, the Audit Committee's guidelines specify the elements that should be addressed in the institutional program review processes, and the audit process imposes a stern test on those processes, by determining if institutional practices conform to the guidelines and if the institutional reviews actually do what they are saying they are doing.

Ontario universities are proud of both processes of self-regulation, are willing to spend the significant amount of money that is required to sustain them, and are confident that they foster continuous improvement in program quality and facilitate informed decision-making about program weaknesses and strengths. I would emphasize, however, that the identification of weaknesses leads to very tough decisions – I'm not being flippant when I say that in almost all cases, program weaknesses are most effectively addressed by providing more funding to the program to allow the hiring of expert faculty, the improvement of library resources, the purchase of up-to-date equipment for labs and classrooms, and the provision of improved student services and academic support services. Rather than offer sub-standard programs, and with insufficient funding to address weaknesses, programs are closed or substantially reduced, reducing the range of programs available to our students. Quality costs money.

I have discussed the provincial scene with an emphasis on the Rae Review and the anticipated recommendations for an increased government investment in universities. But I recognize that issue of funding for quality is complex. Several



other factors come in to play, including the contribution from students through tuition.

Earlier today, the panel discussing ‘Funding for the Future’ examined public and private responsibilities and benefits. The issue of the personal and societal benefits derived from university education – and the appropriate level of tuition to reflect personal benefits – is a difficult one. COU advocates a policy framework in which university governing boards can exercise their authority to set tuition fees, program by program, based on an analysis of value of the program in a competitive market, the resources that are needed to provide a high quality learning experience for students, and the capacity of the university to help ensure that no student is denied access due to financial means.

This reflects the assumption that if affordability is suitably addressed by a robust student financial system – COU made a long and detailed recommendation to the Rae Review on the improvements needed to OSAP to ensure access – students can and should be willing to make a fair contribution to their educational costs to help ensure that they receive a quality education. We do not want our students asking “Access to what?” Rather, we want our students to recognize that they are getting a good product for a fair cost.

There are numerous other factors that come into play in creating an environment in which university quality can be sustained and continuously improved, including the role of the federal government, particularly in the funding of university research and research infrastructure, but also in their fiscal transfers to provinces. Another key factor is whether government will provide the financial incentives to facilitate collaborative programming between universities and the

colleges so that qualified and interested students can combine the benefits of both types of education. High-quality, innovative, collaborative education is worthwhile but expensive.

Ontario universities anticipate that the Rae Review will recommend a substantial increased investment in universities and that the new investment will be directed to ensuring quality. Earlier in this decade, when the province provided funding for enrolment growth to accommodate the double cohort, the universities rose to the challenge. Now, universities are already examining and debating the measures of quality that will demonstrate to government, and to students, that they are getting a substantial return for an increased investment in quality.

As an example, universities are considering participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which assesses how effectively the university is contributing to learning. In fact, several Ontario universities have already participated in the survey and the results show that our universities lag far behind their American peers in terms of student engagement, a result that is disturbing, but not surprising, considering the funding gap between Ontario and the U.S. There is room for improvement, and with the proper resources we are confident that we will be able to demonstrate improvement.

In closing, I would note that we are all here today because of our commitment to ensuring quality and affordability in Ontario universities, and our desire to debate and discuss the policy and funding environment in which this will occur. Quality costs money. A substantial investment is needed from government to ensure that Ontario universities do not slip into mediocrity. But it is not just about funding – Ontario universities already make a concerted effort through their

program appraisal processes to maintain and continuously improve quality. We are also willing to explore further ways to demonstrate improved quality for an increased investment. We now await Bob Rae's report – a report that doubtless will have a profound effect on the future of higher education in this province – and we are hopeful that it will set us in the right direction, creating the policy and funding environment in which universities will be able to fulfill their potential for the future of this province.

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