

OCUFA's response to the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities' discussion guide

OCUFA

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

INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' summer roundtable discussion guide. The issues and proposed changes outlined in the guide would have a significant impact on university faculty and will require the support of the 17,000 faculty OCUFA represents if they are to be successful.

While OCUFA recognizes that the province's current fiscal circumstances are strained, the discussion guide presents the challenges facing the university sector from a problematic perspective. The discussion guide frames the challenges facing the university sector in terms of the limited availability of public funding and the need for institutions to find cost savings and to do more with less.

In reality, the issue is much larger than the short-term financial constraints posed by the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing recession. Ontario's universities have been underfunded for decades. It is important to understand this fact before contemplating reforms for the university sector.

Universities in Ontario receive less funding per student than any other province in Canada. And per-student funding for Ontario universities has been in steady decline over the past two decades. The Liberal government's visionary *Reaching Higher* plan brought much needed re-investment in the sector; however, it was not enough to erase the long legacy of declining per-student funds coupled with rapidly increasing enrolment. Continued enrolment increases and stagnant public funding mean that per-student dollars are once again in a worrying decline. Even when revenue from tuition is taken into account, Ontario still has the lowest combined provincial operating grants and net student fees in the country. Simply put, Ontario universities are already doing more with less.

The funding gap is therefore much larger than that identified by the discussion guide. It cannot be closed with "efficiencies" or through productivity gains. By any measure, Ontario's universities and their faculty are already highly productive. In terms of the number of students taught, graduation rates, and research output, Ontario's universities perform exceedingly well – in fact they are leaders in Canada. At some point, productivity gains of this kind – doing more with less – will begin to harm the quality of education received by students.

Many of the problems in Ontario higher education that the discussion guide seeks to address are, at their root, driven by persistent underfunding. The Government of Ontario, along with students, administrators, staff and faculty, need to have an honest discussion that acknowledges this reality if we are to develop a meaningful framework for reform.

DIFFERENTIATION

Which filters and principles are most important to prioritize?

Before determining which filters and principles are most important to prioritize, we need to be clear about the goals we hope to achieve by pursuing a strategy to increase differentiation within Ontario's higher education sector.

A model of differentiation that seeks primarily to control costs and deliver higher education with fewer resources will inevitably erode educational quality. By contrast, a university sector that is differentiated in a way that enables students anywhere in Ontario to access higher education programming that meets their needs is a goal worth pursuing.

Teaching and research are at the heart of an effective university education. A model of differentiation that diminishes or removes the research function from a university undermines the core of a quality student experience.

The university sector in Ontario is already highly differentiated in terms of the filters outlined in the discussion guide. Ontario universities vary greatly in terms of size, program mix, graduate program offerings, and program delivery. It is therefore unclear why a policy of differentiation would be required.

If the Ministry intends to use differentiation as a means of ensuring cost control, there needs to be greater clarity about how these filters and principles will be used to guide policy. OCUFA understands that priority filters and principles will be used to establish a framework that will guide the process by which institutions negotiate Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) with the Province. It is not clear, however, how the SMAs will be used as a part of the government's intended strategy to increase differentiation. OCUFA would not support a funding structure that uses institutional performance against the goals outlined in the SMAs to determine allocations of public funding. We believe such a system hurts students by imposing a competitive framework that imposes a punitive hierarchy of "winners" and "losers".

Adopting a differential funding model in order to drive differentiation will create inequities among institutions. Attaching eligibility for core funding to any kind of output measure – and withholding that funding if targets are not met – is counterproductive. If an institution fails to meet a certain government target, clawing back funding will deprive that institution of the resources it requires to improve. Ultimately, the effect of this kind of a funding structure is to penalize the students at any institution that fails to meet the imposed targets. The principle by which universities are funded must be that we fund student success *everywhere* rather than funding government priorities that, while important, may be subject to quick change or revision.

When it comes to driving differentiation in Ontario higher education, universities possess rich practical and immediate knowledge of the particular needs of their students and communities and of their strengths as an institution. Interference from government through a centrally managed differentiation policy or strategy will impede institutions' ability to respond organically to these needs in a way that enables them to do what they do best.

It should be noted that many of the institutional aspirations that deviate from the government's stated goal of a more differentiated higher education sector (as outlined on page five of the discussion guide) result from the underfunding of our universities. For example, institutions pursue a more research-intensive agenda or seek to expand program offerings in order to gain access to additional revenue from granting councils or deregulated tuition streams. By contrast, if the Ministry wants institutions to focus differentially on the areas in which they excel it simply needs to provide adequate and reliable baseline funding for the core activities of the university. Freed from the imperative to chase down any and all available external funding, universities will have more freedom to focus on their unique strengths and goals.

ONLINE

What would OCUFA consider to be key in implementing this approach?

Ontario's faculty are increasingly using learning technology and online delivery to enhance student learning. However, while online learning can indeed be a powerful and useful supplement to the traditional classroom experience, it is not a replacement for face to face classroom interaction. It also takes extensive resources and faculty time to transform a traditional in-class course into a high quality online course.

The proposed Ontario Online Initiative appears to be intended to create leading, high-quality online courses, while at the same time seeking to respond to the need to ensure the transferability of these courses, particularly for students in the early stages of their degree. The emphasis on high-demand courses, however, signals an overarching concern with finding cost-savings.

The proposal to make foundational courses available through an online consortium runs contrary to research that has shown that when students have more face-to-face interaction through traditional in-class courses in the first and second year, they are more likely to succeed. Foundational first and second year courses are not well-suited to an online delivery model because this is when students need the kind of support and interaction provided through in-class learning. This proposal may adversely affect student retention and success rates (particularly for first generation, aboriginal and other traditionally underrepresented students), ironically increasing costs for government.

If the Ministry were to proceed with this proposal, the following faculty considerations would need to be taken into account:

1. Participation in the consortium (and recognition of courses offered through the Ontario Online Initiative by other institutions) would need to be voluntary. Consortium members would need to determine amongst themselves how the consortium should be structured and how it would operate.
2. The development of courses and programs offered by the consortium would need to be subject to the expertise and judgment of local academic senates in the same way that traditional in-class courses are.
3. The academic freedom of faculty members who develop courses for the online consortium would need to be protected. Faculty would need to retain absolute control over the content and structure of their courses.
4. Faculty would need to retain intellectual property rights over the courses they develop for the online portal and other instructors could not be permitted to deliver their courses. The intellectual property arrangement used for OntarioLearn.com, whereby the college (rather than the instructor) owns any course delivered through that portal and courses developed by one faculty member can be delivered by any instructor would not be acceptable to Ontario's university faculty.

CREDIT TRANSFER

What steps could be taken to ensure the success of students who seek to transfer between institutions?

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. To be successful and to secure faculty support, 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.

Ontario's post-secondary education sector was designed in such a way that colleges and universities have highly differentiated mandates. With few exceptions, the college system in Ontario was not designed to prepare students for direct transfer into university programs as is the case in jurisdictions such as Alberta and California.

When thinking about college-to-university transfer, therefore, it is not simply a question of identifying college credits that can be applied toward a university degree program. College and university curricula are geared toward distinct educational goals and feature very different learning environments. Facilitating the transferability of credits from college to university in a way that ensures student success would require the establishment of separate university preparatory programming in the colleges. This would be a resource intensive proposition. 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, the partnership between Humber College and Guelph University, and Lakehead University's engineering program. These kinds of agreements ensure that students receive the preparation they need in order to be successful in both their college and university courses.

When thinking about university-to-university transfer, the course equivalency database proposed in the discussion guide is a reasonable tool for ensuring greater openness about credit transferability. Receiving institutions, however, must retain control over how these credits are applied toward a degree, taking into consideration factors such as student performance and the unique structure of programs at individual institutions.

The suggestion in the discussion guide that institutions must work to "increase the equivalency and transferability of courses and programs across the system" could potentially compromise the autonomy of Ontario's universities. It is well known that self-regulating and autonomous universities are the key to producing graduates and innovations needed to compete in the knowledge economy. To protect this important autonomy, individual departments and institutions must retain the right to determine which courses they will accept as equivalent at their institution. In addition, faculty must not be required to change the content or structure of the courses they deliver in order to meet equivalency requirements.

Imposing an intrusive credit transfer structure could also work against the goal of greater differentiation in the university sector. Strict equivalency requirements could impose pressures towards standardization and uniformity in the sector, which would work against the Ministry's stated goals.

GRAD SPACE ALLOCATIONS AND PROGRAM APPROVALS

While not mentioned specifically in the discussion guide, OCUFA would like to express its support for the establishment of an independent and impartial body – separate from HEQCO – comprised of a range of post-secondary education stakeholders that would be responsible for making recommendations about grad space allocations and program approvals.

Post-secondary education in Ontario is a stakeholder-rich sector, and all of those stakeholders possess practical knowledge that is invaluable to the policy development process. Unfortunately, this immense resource is not being used to its full potential.

Establishing a formalized stakeholder engagement structure responsible for making recommendations about grad space allocations, program approvals, and other policy functions would enable MTCU to better leverage the considerable stakeholder intelligence that exists in the sector. Shifting this responsibility to a stakeholder council would also help to insulate higher education policy decision-making from unwarranted political interference.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

OCUFA appreciates that higher education remains a priority for the Government of Ontario. It also recognizes the government's willingness to embrace innovative ideas for reform. However, care must be taken to ensure that any reform works within Ontario's unique context, and will actually deliver real benefits to students and the province as a whole.

OCUFA is committed to working with its government, administrative, staff and student partners to build a university sector that meets Ontario's social, civic, and economic goals. For this process to be successful, it is important that the on-the-ground reality at Ontario's university be honestly and comprehensively understood by all stakeholders, including government. To achieve this, Ontario's university sector collectively needs to commit to a long-term research and collaboration process. The goal of this collaboration should be continuous improvement, not short-term "shock" reforms motivated by mutable political goals or financial exigency. Ontario's universities face serious challenges in the years ahead. Only by working together can these challenges be met.