



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

On February 12, 2013 the Ontario PC Party released a policy paper titled “Higher Learning for Better Jobs.” The paper claimed to offer a bold new vision for higher education in Ontario, but the policy prescriptions outlined in the paper would have a corrosive impact on Ontario’s universities. The policy paper acknowledges and highlights many of the challenges facing the sector that OCUFA has expressed concerns about for many years. However, the PC response to these real and pressing challenges takes us in the wrong direction.

The paper articulates an instrumental vision of higher education in which the primary purpose of the university is to provide students with job training in order to ensure graduate employment tied to presumed labour market demands. It calls for increased reliance on teaching-only faculty, claiming that this will improve quality within a context of limited finances, and argues that government funding for universities should be tied to a range of performance indicators. The paper’s proposals for higher tuition coupled with increased reliance on restrictive student aid would create further inequities for students and their families and represent a troubling tendency toward greater marketization of higher education.

The policy paper’s proposals for cutting the costs associated with universities by imposing an across the board wage freeze and converting university pensions to defined contribution plans undermines local collective bargaining rights and signals a race to the bottom.

Some of the policy paper’s proposals will be examined in greater detail below. Despite attempts to soften its message by characterizing its proposals as driving economic development and ensuring student access, “Higher Learning for Better Jobs” presents proposals that would result in a narrowly conceived, highly directive model of higher education in Ontario that would exacerbate the inequities that already exist in our universities.

The role of the university

OCUFA is opposed to a conception of the role of the university as primarily focused on job training and economic growth, as the PC policy paper proposes. Universities must strive to fulfill a complex and multifaceted mandate that encompasses far more than job training.

Universities are responsible for undergraduate education; for graduate education and research; for professional studies; and for accessible education and applied research.¹ In addition to these four roles, universities also perform important social and economic functions: training critical and engaged citizens; training students to enter and succeed in the labour market; discovering new knowledge that benefits society broadly; discovering new knowledge with economic and commercial value; interpreting and evaluating existing knowledge and current events; and participating in the development of students as *people* and *citizens*, not just as participants in the labour market.

The single minded focus on higher education as job preparation that is articulated in the PC policy paper fails to grasp the complexity of what a university is and does and the multiple ways in which universities contribute to society, beyond straightforward economic considerations.

Teaching and research

The policy paper proposes increased reliance upon teaching only faculty in order to halt declining quality of education at Ontario's universities. The paper recognizes that Ontario has the highest student-faculty ratio in Canada, class sizes are unacceptably large and hiring of full-time faculty has not even come close to keeping up with enrolment growth. As a remedy to these problems, the paper suggests that more full time teaching-only faculty should be hired. While OCUFA agrees that these are significant challenges that require attention, this solution relies on several problematic assumptions.

First, it ignores the essential connection between teaching and research in university education. Instruction by faculty who are active in research is at the core of university education. 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 research and teaching and without it, we cannot deliver the education that students expect and deserve.

Second, it sees the current arrangements around the distribution of faculty time as rigidly divided between 40 per cent teaching, 40 per cent research and 20 per cent service. Less than ten per cent of faculty in Ontario have collective agreements that specify a 40/40/20 workload distribution, and even in cases where it is specified, the norm is to recognize and provide for flexibility. The paper is correct in noting that funding incentives are structured in a way that forces promotion and tenure committees to value research over teaching. That being said, many outstanding university teachers find ways to focus on teaching.

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, whether they focus on research or are part of a teaching stream. Ultimately, when it comes to teaching and research, it is not a question of

¹ Fallis, G. (2007) *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 18.

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.

Tying funding to performance indicators

The policy paper proposes tying the government funding that universities receive to performance on a variety of indicators. OCUFA believes that attaching eligibility for core funding to performance indicators 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.

The policy paper's suggestion that future enrolment increases (which are accompanied by increased funding) should be tied to an institution's ability to retain students is particularly troubling for a variety of reasons. First, it ignores the fact that Ontario universities boast a graduation rate over 80 per cent, signalling that universities already do a good job retaining students. Further, the data that would be required to support such an initiative is unavailable. Currently Ontario does not track the movement of students through the post-secondary education sector. As a result, when a student leaves one institution, there is no way of knowing if they have transferred to another university, transferred into a college program or left post-secondary education altogether. If we had a system in place that was able to track retention accurately, the graduation rate would likely be even higher. Without access to this data, implementation of a policy that ties enrolment increases to retention would be extremely challenging.

Moreover, linking enrolment growth to graduate employment outcomes, as the paper proposes, ignores the reality that universities do not have control over local, provincial or national labour markets. Further, it fails to recognize that graduate employment rates are shaped by a complex range of factors beyond a university's control.

Tuition and student aid

The policy paper calls for across the board increases to tuition in order to provide universities with the revenue required to reverse declining quality and proposes increases to student financial assistance to ensure that every qualified student can access higher education regardless of income. The efficiency and sustainability of a high tuition and high student aid model has been called into question by numerous research studies.² Increasing tuition does not reduce government expenses as significantly as the paper

² See for example, Martin, C. (2012) Ontario's next tuition framework: Reclaiming cost sustainability for students, families & government. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. <http://www.ousa.ca/wordpress/wp->

implies. When tuition increases, the government's investments in student financial assistance must also increase, particularly if access is to be preserved as the policy paper suggests.

The paper also calls for the complete deregulation of tuition fees in "elite" programs in order to remain internationally competitive. The paper claims that increases to tuition do not act as a deterrent to access, but the reality is that the deregulation of tuition in professional programs such as medicine or law had a significant negative impact on the participation rates of students from lower income families. Further, an OCUFA poll conducted in December 2012 found that 64 per cent of respondents were opposed to a system that increased tuition based on expected income after graduation.

Taken together, the proposals around tuition and student aid could, if implemented, result in a higher education system in which students from low-and middle-income families accessed lower-cost online non-credit based courses or labour-market oriented college degree programs, while students from wealthy families pursued their studies in elite, well-resourced programs at top universities. This model would sustain economic inequalities by streaming students into different quality programs on the basis of income.

Public sector wage freeze

"Higher Learning for Better Jobs" calls for an across the board public sector wage freeze and changes to the arbitration system. Making reference to the PC policy paper on public sector compensation, much of the PC solution for reducing costs in the university sector relies on a compensation freeze strategy that completely overrides local collective bargaining rights.

Pensions

In the same vein, the policy paper points to university pension costs and unfunded liabilities as a drag on university finances that must be resolved. "Higher Learning for Better Jobs" refers to the PC policy paper on retirement security, which calls for the conversion of all defined benefit pensions into defined contribution plans. Not only does this proposed solution ignore the fact that at most universities pensions are collectively bargained, it represents an approach to pensions and retirement income that drives everyone down to the lowest common denominator.

Accountability requirements for student unions

The paper's proposals for increased accountability of student unions, requiring public disclosure of yearly expenses, allowing for opt-out and making membership voluntary are intrusive and unnecessary. These proposals ignore the fact that student unions – like all unions – are democratic organizations that

content/uploads/2012/10/Ontarios-Next-Tuition-Framework-FINAL.pdf, and Mackenzie, H. (2005) The tuition trap. Toronto: Hugh Mackenzie and Associates. http://ocufa.on.ca/wordpress/assets/tuition_trap.pdf

are accountable to their membership. These proposals are a continuation of the anti-labour, anti-democratic and highly interventionist PC policies outlined in their other policy papers.