

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES (CUPE)

RESPONSE TO:

MINISTRY OF TRAINING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

***Strengthening Ontario's Centers of Creativity, Innovation
and Knowledge.***

Introduction

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) represents more than 230,000 members in Ontario. CUPE is Canada's largest union with approximately 600,000 members.

CUPE members deliver public services on the front lines in communities across the country in five main sectors: post-secondary education, school boards, health care, municipalities, and social services.

The Ontario University Workers Coordinating Committee (OUWCC) represents CUPE locals in the post-secondary education sector. The OUWCC represents 70 bargaining units within 39 locals on 17 campuses across Ontario.

Our members include 4,500 facility and support workers, including security, parking, food services, custodial, skilled trades, clerical, administrative, library, and technical workers; and 23,600 academic workers, including instructors and markers, research assistants, graduate assistants, post-doctoral fellows, and ESL instructors.

As a union representing over 28,000 workers, many of whom are students, we are concerned with the Ontario Liberal government's proposed restructuring plan of post-secondary education. This restructuring proposal ignores the real problems, most notably chronic underfunding and a lack of accountability by the post-secondary institutions. Instead, it proposes a number of new initiatives which masks the issues we are currently facing. Three particularly problematic initiatives are:

1. Moving to a 3 year degree from the current 4 year program;
2. Scheduling classes year-round (for 12 months); and
3. A significant increase of course material taught online.

There is no question Ontario desperately needs to consider appropriate changes to the current funding of our post-secondary education system. Years of chronic government underfunding has left us with a system that lacks transparency and creates a competitive climate. Without collaboration and accountability, this will result in a wide-spread systemic imbalance.

We also object to the fact that the proposed restructuring plan includes references to proposed legislated wage freezes and changes to university pension plans, which are not relevant to the restructuring of post-secondary education, and has proceeded without genuine consultation with stakeholders.

There is no need to balance the provincial budget on cuts to education. The current restructuring proposal is a scheme that reduces government investment in post-secondary education at a severe cost to quality and will increase the financial burden on students and their families. Whether it is Minister of Education, Laurel Broten, cutting more than two-billion dollars from the education system or the MTCU's restructuring plan, Ontarians know these are cuts to education.

If implemented in its current form, this proposed restructuring plan will have long-lasting, detrimental impacts to post-secondary education in Ontario.

A clear understanding of funding formulas and transparency of fund distribution are vital to any restructuring process. Currently, post-secondary institutions receive over \$7,000,000,000 in public funding, for which they are not held accountable. This is unacceptable.

Input from all stakeholders is vital – institutions, students, and workers are all integral to developing a comprehensive restructuring plan that actually addresses the current challenges confronting post-secondary institutions and the spending of our scarce education dollars.

Potential Impacts

Since the 1990s, universities have been intent on expansion without the assurance of long-term stabilized infrastructure funding. Class sizes have increased exponentially, while access to one-on-one time with professors and teaching assistants has been sacrificed. The proposed restructuring plan would only continue this trend. Instead of addressing the major issue of funding, it side-steps this systemic issue by recommending three year degrees, increased online learning, and year-round classes – all of which are currently available. Rather than expanding these aspects of post-secondary education, we should be focusing on reducing class sizes, investing in existing infrastructure, and cutting tuition fees.

Moving to a 3 year degree

Simply moving to a 3 year degree program would eliminate courses from the curriculum, reducing the level and quality of education, and devaluing bachelor degrees in Ontario. It would inhibit students from pursuing graduate degrees in other provinces or countries. It would also disadvantage Ontario students in today's highly competitive job market.

Scheduling classes year round

Extending the current academic year to 12 months denies students the opportunity to earn money for tuition and living expenses during the summer. Without access to these employment opportunities, student debt load will increase substantially. Furthermore, a number of key industries that are dependent on student summer employment.

There is also a serious impact on the ability of university workers to maintain the crumbling infrastructure on campus. Currently, there are thousands of deferred maintenance projects on campuses across Ontario. For trades and maintenance workers, the summer time is critical to addressing the billions of dollars of deferred maintenance on campus. This is also the time for preventative maintenance, restoration, and renovation projects without interfering with the school year. Without a campus full of students, these workers have the opportunity to do uninterrupted maintenance on various buildings, ensuring health and safety on our campuses.

Increasing online learning

A significant increase of course material taught online also has a number of negative impacts. Instead of concentrating on increasing e-learning, there is an urgent need to invest in the existing infrastructure to improve the quality of education.

Increasing e-learning decreases in-class education. This proposal ignores the fact that professors, sessional instructors, teaching assistants, and support workers provide an invaluable service. Questions need to be answered on e-learning and student achievement. Currently, Athabasca University in Alberta, a predominantly e-learning institute, has the lowest completion rate in the country.

Our academic workers provide meaningful mentorship, work closely with students, and tailor instruction to meet students' individual needs ensuring they can meet the demands of an overly competitive job market. Our support workers maintain buildings, and ensure students have a safe living, learning, and working environment.

E-learning, which is already being invested in by a number of multi-national corporations, threatens to bring about the largest privatization of academic services ever seen in Ontario. This compromises the basic tenets of academic freedom and intellectual property rights; staples of any strong, democratic, civil society. It would also result in a dramatic decrease of the number of sessional instructors, professors, and teaching assistants – the very people who ensure and enrich our strong tradition of academic freedom and intellectual property.

E-learning is a thinly veiled plan to lay off thousands of academic and university support workers.

Recommendations

We propose 4 achievable goals for post-secondary education in Ontario:

1. Making universities accountable for the funding they receive by facilitating democratic governance structures;
2. Ensuring post-secondary education is affordable through adequate, multi-year government funding;
3. Maintaining a high standard of educational excellence in post-secondary education, with an emphasis on critical thought and research for public good; and
4. Maintaining collaborative labour relations on our campuses.

Changes to our post-secondary education system are overdue; the last massive overhaul in post-secondary education funding for universities was by Minister of Education and later Ontario Premier, William G. Davis in the late 1960s.

It is clear that any changes to the funding structure will have long-term significant impacts on our post-secondary education system. In recognition of this, a careful and measured approach is necessary.

On behalf of CUPE in Ontario and the OUWCC, we recommend a genuine consulting process of all interested parties (students and workers) and not a process that only consults with the administrators of our institutions. Without this collaborative approach to restructuring the government's proposal it only will weaken Ontario's centers of creativity, innovation and knowledge.