



**INNOVATION & PRODUCTIVITY  
ROUNDTABLES:**

*A response*

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Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ***Overarching Concerns***

In this section, we address concerns raised in the consultations about dichotomies between standardization and innovation, and argue that there are ways that we can ensure consistency in learning outcomes across the system without infringing on institutional autonomy or academic freedom. We also recommend once more that the CLA be introduced in Ontario using samples of students from each institution, not as a standardized test. Finally, we recognize the value of the government setting priorities for the transformation of Ontario's post-secondary system, and holding it accountable for achieving these priorities.

## ***E-portfolios & Diploma Supplements***

This section explores the idea of e-portfolios as degree supplements, and suggest that if Ontario were to adopt e-portfolios widely, a few concerns must be addressed. Firstly, that universities are responsible for populating the supplements with learning outcomes. Secondly, that the language used in supplements is consistent between institutions. Finally, that the government work with the business community to promote the e-portfolios and explain their value.

## ***Quality Teaching and Learning***

The concern about the imbalance between teaching and research in Ontario's university sector lead to a number of discussions about how we might raise the stature of teaching and learning. In this section, we recognize the value of teaching and learning centres that already exist in many of Ontario's post-secondary institutions. To raise the stature and

effectiveness of these centres, we recommend the government repurpose some current funding to provide them with additional financial support and recommend that these centres administer teaching chair programs system-wide. We also recommend that graduate students be provided with teaching training based on current research around effective pedagogy, recognizing that a substantial proportion of PhD students intend to pursue a career in academia.

## ***Online Learning***

OUSA believes that improvements to online learning can benefit traditional and non-traditional students alike. To ensure that Ontario provides high quality online learning, we recognize that graduate teaching training should include training on technology enabled learning, and recommend that the government create an online course-development fund that incents collaboration.

## ***Credit Transfer***

This section explores students' continued desire to see student mobility improved system-wide.

## ***Experiential Learning***

In this section, we note many consultation participants' concern that any expansion of experiential learning be an expansion of all types of experiential learning. This means ensuring that all types of students with all types of career-interests benefit from expanded experiential learning opportunities.

## ***Funding Formula***

The idea that enrolment based funding acts as a disincentive to collaboration between institutions is explored in this section. We recommend that moving forward, a portion of new operating funding to institutions be enveloped towards achieving certain goals system-wide. We also recommend that the government create a differentiated innovation fund to provide funding to specific institutions that demonstrate innovation in teaching and learning, and suggest this fund should prioritize multi-institutional partnerships. Finally, we suggest a few things that must be kept in mind when considering a review of the current funding formula.

# INTRODUCTION

OUSA was happy to participate in six of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and University's seven roundtable discussions on innovation and productivity. Throughout these consultations, we had the opportunity to speak with university and college administrators, faculty, students, as well as other stakeholders within the Ontario post-secondary sector. In the consultations we shared our ideas for increasing productivity and innovation in the sector, many of which can be found in our initial submission to the consultations, *Educated Reform*.

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The aim of this document is to address some of the ideas and concerns raised in the consultations from students' perspective. It will not act as a follow-up to every recommendation in our initial submission. Instead, it will focus on the areas where our initial submission intersected quite obviously with the other concerns brought up throughout the consultations, and provide some additional clarification where we believed it was necessary.

# OVERARCHING CONCERNS

Throughout the roundtable discussions, several points came up repeatedly. In this section, we hope to discuss these themes from a student's point of view, and illuminate how the various concerns brought up during the process might be addressed.

One theme that arose repeatedly was a belief in a dichotomy between standardization and innovation. Ontario's system currently allows for a great deal of institutional autonomy, which gives each institution flexibility in program offerings, pedagogy and research objectives. This concern was particularly acute in discussions around learning outcomes: can Ontario set expected learning outcomes for different programs and courses without infringing on a professor's autonomy and academic freedom?

The concern also surfaced with regards to credit transfer: how can Ontario move towards system-wide transfer of first- and second-year credits without standardizing the system, impinging once more on system autonomy and a professor's academic freedom? Students' concern is that this perceived dichotomy can get in the way of meaningful conversations about how Ontario can move the system forward to improve both quality and student mobility.

OUSA believes that learning outcomes can be set without impinging on a professor's academic freedom or on institutional autonomy. At the system level, students should be graduating from an undergraduate degree with critical reasoning skills, analytical skills, and reading and writing skills. At a program level, students should be able to know the discipline-specific

skills with which they will graduate. For instance, an engineering student will graduate with certain skills, and more specific skills if they are specializing in chemical, mechanical, or civil engineering.

There are several end goals to the definition of learning outcomes. First, students should know that when they take a course, they are going to finish with particular knowledge and skills.

Secondly, employers or other professors who look at a student's transcript should clearly see what skills and knowledge this student has acquired in their degree program.

This process does not have to entail a loss of academic freedom: evaluating learning outcomes should not mean professors are given a pre-packaged course and instructed how to teach it. There

may be program and year level expectations of what a student should be learning in a particular course, but the materials, content, and teaching styles used to achieve these learning outcomes can and should still be within the purview of the professor. For courses that are not required or foundational for students in their respective programs, professors should set their own learning outcomes in advance and be accountable to students for guiding them to those goals.

At a system level, we should monitor that our institutions are teaching the analytical reasoning, reading, and writing skills with which the sector generally agrees all Ontario students should graduate. We can do this through the implementation of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). While we will not address

*“One theme that arose repeatedly was the belief in a dichotomy between standardization and innovation.”*

the CLA in detail here, because it is discussed in depth in *Educated Reform*, we would like to clarify the purpose of the test. The CLA is a competency test that can be conducted using samples of students. In other words, it does not have to be implemented as a standardized test. Students are interested in measuring whether graduates from post-secondary institutions have improved in a number of general areas since entering their post-secondary studies. The data gathered from the test will help identify areas where our institutions need to improve their teaching, but this data should not be used to determine how much funding each institution should receive.

There was also a broader discussion of the role of the government in any process of transformation. Students would be concerned if the government were to step in and micromanage changes to the system, reforming it in the way they believe best, rather than engaging the sector in a discussion. However, we believe that the government, having held these discussions, can and must play a role in setting priorities for the system. Informed by the strategic mandate agreements, the government should set meaningful targets for individual institutions and the system as a whole, based on a vision for the system designed through the consultations that have taken place this summer. Universities should then report publically on the progress made towards these targets. There should be incentives in place towards achieving targets, and penalties if meaningful progress is not made.

# E-PORTFOLIOS & DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENTS

One idea and best practice that came up a few times in the consultations around learning outcomes was the idea of e-portfolios and diploma supplements. These would be an online collection of the skills and competencies a student attains throughout their degree. There were also some suggestions around these online records containing the history of a student's extracurricular involvement.

In any case, the purpose would be to highlight to potential employers and other institutions the skills and abilities of a graduating student.

Students are supportive of exploring the implementation of e-portfolios, and recommend that the government examines how they have been received in jurisdictions where they have been previously implemented. For instance, all but two countries in the European Union have adopted diploma supplements to provide additional support for recent graduates of an undergraduate program. These records would extend beyond academics to reflect a more accurate, well-rounded depiction of students' achievements and skills.

If e-portfolios are implemented, students would want to be assured that the university would be responsible for populating the supplements with learning outcomes. Furthermore, the language surrounding any learning outcomes listed in diploma supplements should be consistent from institution to institution. Otherwise, their implementation could create a great deal of confusion surrounding the compatibility of credits for transfer.

Additionally, the government must work to actively promote the e-portfolios to the employer community. Surveys conducted by the European Students Union (ESU) have found that only one in five members of the general public and two in five employers were aware of the existence of diploma supplements. This is a strong indication of a low level of usage in the employment community.

For the diploma supplements to be useful in helping students' transition into the labour market, the employment community must know where to find them and how they should be interpreted.

*“The purpose would be to highlight to potential employers and other institutions the skills and abilities of a graduating student.”*

# QUALITY TEACHING & LEARNING

The discussions of quality teaching and learning were of particular interest to OUSA, as access to quality teaching and learning is one of the fundamental concerns of undergraduate students. As we have discussed in *Educated Reform* and elsewhere, students believe that there is a fundamental imbalance in the university sector towards research and away from teaching. This is not to say that students do not value research; students appreciate professors who are actively engaged in their subject, keeping up with and contributing to the generation of knowledge in their field. Students become concerned when a focus on research leads to a decline in the quality of teaching they receive.

The imbalance between teaching and research was recognized in many of the discussions in which we participated throughout the consultation process. There were a few reasons brought up for why this imbalance existed. Recognized first of all, was the amount of funding provided to universities for research, and the strong incentives this creates for all institutions to increase their research output.

Secondly, we heard that in a global competition for talent, research is the prime measure of success. This means that institutions that do more research receive higher rankings, more recognition and attract more faculty who compete internationally. This second concern has two consequences: universities are driven to increase their research output, and many professors are driven to devote more time to research because this is the measure of their productivity and success. There

is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it is important to ensure that quality teaching is not an afterthought.

*Educated Reform* did not place a great deal of emphasis on the infrastructure of teaching and learning centres. However, it must be recognized that they play a crucial role in raising the quality of teaching on campuses. In many cases however, they can be limited by their role in the institution, their funding, and a culture that may lead to professors who need teaching and learning support the most actually shying away from them.

In the consultations, OUSA heard a few great examples of how teaching and learning centers are an active part of their institutions' culture. Successful examples of teaching and learning

*“Students appreciate professors who are actively engaged in their subject, keeping up with [...] knowledge in their field.”*

centres are those that assist faculty in developing new courses, and work with faculty who wish to improve their teaching or try new teaching methodologies. At Humber, new faculty participate in a mandatory two year “teaching excellence” program, where they are expected to engaged weekly with their Centre for Teaching and Learning. For example, in their first year, faculty are expected to spend three hours per week at the Centre and share an instructional best practice with their entire cohort. Instructors at Humber also maintain teaching and learning portfolios that they are expected to share with their peers.

OUSA was happy to hear about the level of teaching support faculty are given, and the institutional emphasis on high-quality teaching. We recognize however, that colleges operate in a different context than universities - where

teaching does not have to compete as much with research - and that universities do not have the same ability to require faculty to participate in programs or processes to help them improve their teaching. However, universities could benefit from systems similar to the ones in place at Humber. At the very least, the profile of teaching and learning centres should be raised. How might this be accomplished? First of all, the government should provide funding to ensure that teaching and learning centres have the resources required to improve the quality of teaching and learning on campuses. Providing targeted funding for these centres would be another signal to the post-secondary sector that the government values teaching and learning. In *Educated Reform*, OUSA makes several suggestions on how current funding could be repurposed to support this objective.

Another way that teaching and learning centres could become more central to teaching quality improvement would be to make them responsible for administering teaching chair programs system-wide. In other words, if the government were to fund the creation of teaching chairs, the programs could be managed locally by teaching and learning centers. For campuses with teaching chair programs, this is usually already the case. Furthermore, teaching chairs could increase the use of teaching and learning centres in variety of other ways. Not only could these professors make use of resources available in teaching and learning centres when developing their proposals, they also could make use of resources in these centres to help share their findings throughout their institution.

Another area OUSA did not discuss in *Educated Reform*, but has discussed elsewhere and came up repeatedly in the consultations, was the

need to train graduate students to teach. It was recognized that while graduate students are given substantial training in research, there is little or no training given to graduate students for teaching. This is problematic for two reasons: firstly, many graduate students take on a variety of teaching responsibilities during their studies; secondly, according to the National Research Council's Survey of Earned Doctorates, a large portion (54%) of PhD students entered their graduate studies with the intention of finding employment within colleges and universities upon completion of their degree<sup>1</sup>. Given these facts, students and many others throughout the consultation process, emphasized that we must ensure graduate students are given the tools necessary to be effective teachers.

However, the consultations also recognized that in an expansion of teaching training for graduate students, we must make sure that we are not reinforcing the use of out-of-date teaching techniques. There will be little benefit investing in and requiring teaching training in Ontario if the end result is to create a new generation of professors using outdated teaching techniques. Instead, teaching training must be designed based on a thorough understanding of the current research around effective pedagogy.

# ONLINE LEARNING

OUSA has long supported and awaited the development of an Ontario Online Institute (OOI), and hopes that progress can be made toward its implementation. An online institute will provide a number of benefits, to both traditional and non-traditional students. During the consultations, a number of concerns were raised that online education could not match the quality of in-class education and that it represents a way to deliver degrees on the cheap. If such a model were to be proposed, OUSA would not support it. However, OUSA does not believe that a low-quality, cheaply-built method of course delivery is where the world of online learning is heading. By the same token, we do not believe that low quality is going to be the future of online learning in Ontario.

At many institutions, students studying on campus make use of courses delivered online. Traditional students benefit from the flexibility provided by online courses, and by the ability to take courses with which they might have more difficulty at their own pace. But traditional students studying at universities with more limited course offerings will also benefit if they are able to access courses online unavailable at their home institution, and know that these courses will contribute towards their program requirements. As one participant at the consultations noted, online learning can allow a student to access courses by an expert based in a university hundreds or thousands of kilometers away.

Online learning will be a key tool in allowing Ontario to reach a 70% post-secondary attainment rate, by providing more learning opportunities to non-traditional students. Students with dependents can benefit from the flexibility that online learning provides, as can mature students who work part- or full-time.

For non-traditional students, expanded online learning opportunities may be the difference between being able to complete a degree or not.

Moving forward with online learning, we have made a number of recommendations in *Educated Reform*. However, there are some key concerns that we heard in the consultations that are worth addressing. As has been repeated in the consultations, we should not expect online learning to substantially reduce costs in the system, at least not in the short term. One of the expert panelists at the consultation on Technology Enabled Learning in Waterloo said that one hour of high-quality online content required thirteen hours to develop. Part of this cost is in ensuring that professors have the training and support required to develop online courses.

We have already identified concerns about the lack of pedagogical training for professors in Ontario; this concern extends further when we ask this same faculty to teach engaging, high-quality online courses. This also speaks to the need to train graduate students in teaching methods; we should ensure that graduate teaching training includes training in how to teach effectively online and make use of technology-enabled resources.

The government should help offset the cost of creating high-quality online learning material through the creation of an online course development innovation fund. This fund could be used to incent collaboration between universities, by providing funding to faculty working in partnership across institutions to develop new courses taught in innovative ways designed to improve the learning experience. Collaboration has been identified in the consultations as a way to reduce the costs

associated with developing online content, and students are supportive of efforts to increase collaboration in the sector, where it might avoid duplication of online content.

We also should not be limiting the opportunities

for students to learn in class based on an expansion of online learning. However, we should invest in online learning options recognizing their utility in increasing the flexibility and accessibility of post-secondary education.

## HELPFUL TANGENT

### ***Blended Learning and Teaching Infrastructure***

*Blended learning is a form of hybrid online/in-class instruction that allows professors to make better use of in-class time, allowing more discussion and mutual discovery to take place, while lecture content is moved online, where students can access it at times convenient to them and at their own pace. In many ways, it is a way of turning the classroom into an interactive discussion space, while leaving content delivery to an online lecture. The exciting thing about blended learning is that it completely transcends the traditional debate about whether online learning can ever match the quality of in-class; rather, it utilizes the best of both worlds.*

*An effective blended classroom requires extensive preparation and pedagogical planning. Students must be motivated to self-direct their learning and the discussions must promote inquiry and discovery. This sort of activity requires professors to devote a great deal of attention to their teaching. It is perhaps for this reason that teaching-focused instructors facilitate some of the best exemplars of blended learning in Ontario.*

*Professor Joseph Kim at McMaster University has used blended learning to great success. Professor Kim is both a teaching chair, and a teaching focused faculty member. His overhaul of McMaster's introductory psychology course has generated a great deal of acclaim and buzz in Ontario. For good reason: Kim turned the course from a weekly video lecture and tutorial to an interactive experience that is educating many more students at a higher level of quality.*

*OUSA believes that this McMaster exemplar demonstrates not only the value of blended learning as a style of pedagogy, but the value of the infrastructure it took to support a professor whose primary interest is teaching students as well. McMaster's adoption of teaching-focused professors and creation of teaching chairs has directly facilitated innovation in teaching that is improving the lives of students. It is time that the provincial government recognizes this value and supports this infrastructure system-wide so that students across the province can benefit from this practice.*

# CREDIT TRANSFER

Students saw the announcement of the University Credit Transfer Consortium in late September as recognition of the poor student mobility that exists in Ontario. Unfortunately, the consortium has not addressed all Ontario students' need for better student mobility.

While some Ontario students benefit from this agreement, many students do not. Students in Ontario's thirteen other universities have been left out of the benefits that consortium schools have identified their students will receive. Students studying outside of arts and science in

consortium schools also have not received any benefit from this agreement. Finally, students transferring after their second or third year will only partially benefit from this agreement. Recognizing the number of students who have been left out of this agreement, OUSA recommends that the government take action to ensure that all students in Ontario receive the benefits of improved credit transfer. *Educated Reform* lays out the improvements to credit transfer that Ontario students would like to see system wide.

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning was a topic where there appeared to be fairly strong agreement among participants in the consultations. Most agreed that experiential learning is a good thing, and that it is something that we should be expanding. However, there were concerns about the definition of experiential learning, and a desire to ensure that any expansion increases all kinds of experiential learning.

We have discussed the benefits of experiential learning in *Educated Reform*, but believe it is worth noting a few points that arose during the consultations. First, the government should ensure that there are experiential learning opportunities for all types of students with all types of career interests. This means investing in service-learning and undergraduate research opportunities, as well as co-op positions. But it also means looking at ways that co-op opportunities can be expanded beyond typical business and engineering opportunities. We

recommend in *Educated Reform* that the government continue to expand incentives to employers to hire co-op students, but also recommend that the government itself commit to expanding its hiring of co-op students, and explore ways it can help support these opportunities among NGOs and not-for-profits. Students also agree with the desire to expand entrepreneurial learning options. We heard of a few practices throughout the province that are helping students to launch their own businesses, and these efforts should be applauded. However, the consultations revealed that entrepreneurial learning options should include social entrepreneurship as well as business entrepreneurship.

# FUNDING FORMULA

Throughout the consultations, the current funding framework was identified as a barrier to collaboration and innovation in the sector. Specifically identified was the concern that universities were competing for students, as funding is based on student enrolment, and this acts as a disincentive to partnership and collaboration between institutions. Moving forward, students believe the government should envelope a portion of new university operating funding to support certain objectives system-wide, such as expanding experiential education or improving credit transfer.

New funding should be provided based on the achievement of certain goals, and institutions should be required to demonstrate that they have met these goals to ensure continued access to these funds. Specifically, students believe that the government should ensure that new funding flowing to universities can and will achieve measurable improvements in quality for students.

The government should also create a differentiated innovation fund that provides funding to specific institutions that demonstrate leadership in innovative teaching practices, whether online or in the classroom. To incent collaboration, the government should prioritize innovation that includes multi-institutional partnerships. Unlike the previously mentioned system-wide envelope funding, the innovation fund should not fund each university equally, but should be based on the quality of proposals submitted by participating institutions.

Students recognize that the current funding

formula is not perfect, but we also recognize that any major changes to it will inevitably be to the advantage of some institutions and the disadvantage of others. Recently, there have been many references to a pending review of the university funding formula and students recommend that discussions keep the following thoughts in mind:

***Some element of enrolment-based funding makes sense:*** While funding based on enrolment carries many drawbacks, it must be remembered that institutions also have some costs that are directly tied to the number

of credit-courses students enroll in. For example, support service staffing, contract faculty hiring, space allocation and material costs all scale with the number of students taking courses.

***Changing the funding formula will not increase financial sustainability in-and-of itself:***

Some institutional costs are fixed and increase annually. The costs of tenured faculty and maintenance of physical infrastructure tend to scale up with more student enrolment, but do not decrease when enrolment dips. Critics of the

current enrolment funding system often assert that accepting more students is the only way that institutions can collect enough revenue to meet their rising costs. This must change; the current fixed costs of the system will remain and rise for the years to come, regardless of how the system is funded. Changing the funding weights assigned to different programs will not curb the growth in these costs, making the funding formula a poor vessel for increasing the financial sustainability of institutions.

*“To incent collaboration, the government should prioritize innovation that includes multi-institutional partnerships.”*

***If properly designed, a changed funding formula could shift institutional priorities, but new revenue would have to be an important component of this shift.*** It is well known that funding can shape institutional behavior. A new funding formula could incentivize institutional investment in defined priorities. However, to secure sincere investments in any public priority, the formula must provide institutions with new funding to accomplish these public goals. It must also provide institutions with a clear road forward for growth and allow them to meet some of their rising costs. Currently, enrollment-based funding has meant that universities compete for new students to secure new revenue. A new funding formula could end the competition, but revenue would still have to be the primary driver for any behavioral change.

# CONCLUSION

OUSA appreciates the government's efforts to engage the sector in a discussion about how we can increase the productivity and innovation of Ontario's post-secondary sector. As students have been asked to take on more and more of the cost of their education in the past few decades, they have become increasingly concerned about the accountability of the post-secondary sector. Students want to know how their increased investment has led to increases in the area that has the biggest effect on them – teaching quality. Government funding of post-secondary education is insufficient, Ontario has the lowest per-student funding in the country, and this is something the government must address in the near future if our post-secondary system is to maintain its public nature. However, institutions must also make sure that they are making best use of the public and their students' funds, and ensure the best direct return for their students.

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# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Universities* (New York: Boyer Commission, 1998).

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