



**Submission to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
on the discussion paper, *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity,
Innovation and Knowledge***

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the discussion paper, *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge*. This discussion paper outlines the government's vision for the post-secondary education sector by describing Ontario's colleges and universities as centres of teaching and research that will "drive creativity, innovation, knowledge and community engagement." The stated goal of the consultation process is to identify ways to "increase productivity" by improving student learning options, meeting the needs of life-long learners, and enhancing quality, in ways that are financially sustainable.

OSSTF/FEESO is a trade union that represents 60,000 members across the Province of Ontario. The union works to protect our diverse membership in over 150 bargaining units in elementary and secondary schools, private schools, and universities. Our members include public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, early childhood educators, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, university support staff, and many others in education.

It is clear that the impetus for the suggested changes to the post-secondary education sector is the current fiscal climate in Ontario. OSSTF/FEESO acknowledges that as a province we are faced with difficult decisions around the economy, spending and deficits. OSSTF/FEESO, in its role as the bargaining agent for support staff employees in five Ontario universities as well as 55,000 other public sector workers, has been actively working toward responsible and reasonable solutions to the financial issues facing publicly funded education. We believe that investment in education is an essential pre-condition for stimulating economic growth and development. Deep cutbacks to the public sector only prolong recessionary conditions.

We caution against an approach that focuses on quantity over quality. Increasing the total number of university students without regard for the quality of education they receive is in direct opposition to the stated goal of improving innovation and creativity. Increasing the number of adults enrolled in post-secondary education institutions without a concomitant increase in funding will lead to lowered attainment rates, dissatisfaction with the post-secondary education system, and reduced public confidence. As more students enrol in universities, there must be adequate funding to allow for an increase in capital spending on infrastructure, including additional support staff. The increase in funding must be accompanied by clearly defined processes that ensure universities allocate these funds in a way that is transparent, and provides accountability for spending.

OSSTF/FEESO's experience with the Faculties of Education has shown that increasing enrollment without consideration of the job market, simply leads to thousands of frustrated, debt-laden, young people with teaching credentials and little hope of ever obtaining a full-time position in their chosen field. While the discussion paper refers to "increased productivity" in the post-secondary sector, this term is not clearly defined. Does productivity refer to the number of degrees granted, the number of completed credit hours, the amount or value of the research produced, or the level of community engagement? For any of these measures, increased productivity is only possible with increased funding. Without this funding, the true cost will be reduced educational quality due to larger class sizes with minimal student-faculty interaction, diminished support services, and lack of adequate infrastructure.

As the government considers ways to find efficiencies within the system, there should be consideration given to the role of university support staff. By ensuring there are adequate numbers of support staff and better utilizing the skills of these employees, their contributions will allow faculty members to focus on teaching and research to the benefit of students and ultimately employers and the economy.

The proposals of year-round schooling and creation of pathways that promote credit transfer among institutions both hold merit but should be pursued with caution. There may be implications for the collective agreements of employees in the post-secondary education sector with respect to year-round schooling. A move to year round schooling may improve accessibility for some students and provide increased opportunities for co-operative education or internships. It will also necessitate the hiring of additional faculty and support staff to provide the required services during the spring and summer months. Year-round schooling in the public school system has been met with limited success as students in Ontario, often because of the increased employment opportunities related to climate and tourism, generally require the summer months for work to finance their studies.

Also to be considered is the stress that year-round schooling places upon students. OSSTF/FEESO is a strong advocate for the need to promote student success in school and in life and recognizes that this is strongly linked with student mental health and well-being. If there is a move towards implementing year-round schooling, there will need to be a coordinated effort across government Ministries to establish a comprehensive Mental Health strategy to support youth in this environment.

E-learning courses may provide increased access for students with disabilities or those who live in remote regions, however, such courses must provide rich, high quality learning. We should be cautious about over-using this type of learning environment as it sacrifices the learning opportunities that come from face-to-face discussions in classrooms and seminars. Meaningful interactions among students, faculty, academic advisors, counsellors and teaching assistants provide for spontaneous and valuable learning that is not possible through e-learning. The experience of on-line universities in the United States, with their reputation as "credit mills" should be a cautionary tale.

Currently, employers in Canada and in other jurisdictions view the attainment of credentials from Ontario universities as a sign of excellence. University graduates are considered to have received a high-quality education that focuses on critical thinking skills, research, and creative problem-solving. The proposal to create differentiated universities, those focused on undergraduate teaching, and others that are research-focused will create a two-tiered system of university education. Students will be forced to choose between teaching-only universities and full-service universities. This two-tiered system of universities has proven to be problematic in the United States with differentiation of degrees based on the type of institution that granted it.

The assumption that teaching-focused institutions will provide a higher quality learning experience has not been substantiated. If the goal is to have students become independent, self-directed, creative and innovative thinkers, then a well-rounded education that involves engagement in research is more likely to achieve this. Instead of facilitating a tiered system of post-secondary education, the focus should be on ensuring each institution strives for excellence, celebrating its unique culture and differentiating itself from others through distinct missions and activities. A cookie-cutter approach to post-secondary institutions is contradictory to the objective of innovation and creativity.

In a similar way, the notion of 3-year degrees may boost the “attainment” statistics, but will perpetuate the ranking of universities and degrees, a situation that currently exists in the United States. The removal of the fifth year of education at the secondary level has already resulted in students arriving at post-secondary educational facilities, lacking proficiency in some necessary competencies such as time management, research skills, communication, financial literacy, and social awareness. In many cases they have not received the well-rounded education that the fifth year of high school allowed, thus they find themselves altering their post-secondary choices and career goals mid-stream. As with the removal of the fifth year of high school, removal of the fourth year of university will simply result in graduates who are less educated and less able to contribute to a knowledge-based economy because the development of critical thinking skills takes time, appropriate supports for students, and a variety of opportunities to challenge themselves in their learning environments.

As the consultation continues on a new tuition framework, we caution that policy decisions cannot be based only on the narrow parameters of productivity as noted above. Life-long learning and learning for personal growth and fulfillment are often at the root of innovation. Tuition policies that are tied to job prospects and employer expectations are short-sighted and ultimately counter-productive to the stated goal of increasing creativity and innovation.

The proposal that standardized assessment tools be used to measure the quality of post-secondary institutions is flawed in that each institution should be encouraged to promote and build upon its strengths and unique features rather than attempting to fit a particular set of arbitrarily designed outcomes. A narrow, cookie-cutter approach to post-secondary education seems to encourage the movement toward standardized testing as a misguided means of determining quality. Our experience with standardized testing in the public education system has demonstrated that it has little or no impact on the quality of the educational experience for students.

Learning outcomes are best measured using in-course assessment and evaluation tools that are designed and interpreted by the faculty and teaching assistants. A standardized test that appears to measure learning outcomes should never be used to determine funding through a specially-designed funding formula. Such a mechanism simply penalizes those institutions that are struggling with underfunding. Similar results are apparent in the public education system as schools located in areas with large numbers of students from lower socio economic backgrounds tend to perform less well on EQAO tests. Reduced resources resulting from an inability to fundraise, minimal family and community involvement in the school and individual health and social pressures have the most significant impact on the results on standardized tests. Further reducing the funding to such schools is counter-intuitive.

In a similar way, reducing funding to struggling post-secondary education institutions simply penalizes students and magnifies the issues. Such institutions will be forced to augment underfunding with a greater concentration on research and the funding that comes with it, instead of focusing on teaching and improving learning outcomes. In addition, the cost of such a system of standardized testing is prohibitive in a time of financial constraint when there is little or no evidence that such measurements provide real accountability or assurance of quality.

Conclusion:

OSSTF/FEESO understands the challenges this government faces during recessionary times. While this discussion paper contains some promising proposals to improve the quality of post-secondary education, specifically a system to improve the transferability of credits among institutions and additional e-learning opportunities, even these strategies should be pursued with caution to ensure that quality and credit integrity are maintained or enhanced. Many of the other proposals are likely to be counter-productive to the stated goals of improving the creative and innovation potential of post-secondary graduates. In some cases the proposals are likely to be more costly in the long term. Finally, we caution against a quantity over quality approach, especially in a time of funding constraint. Increased attainment rates are only possible with adequate funding to increase the number of faculty and support staff, and pay for infrastructure needs.

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Protecting and Enhancing Public Education
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