

**Funding the future:  
A winning formula  
for students,  
workers and  
Ontario's public  
postsecondary  
education sector**

**OPSEU/SEFPO Submission  
to the Blue-Ribbon Panel**

**May 12, 2023**





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# Funding the future: A winning formula for students, workers and Ontario's public postsecondary education sector

OPSEU/SEFPO represents approximately 45,000 postsecondary education workers from all 24 of Ontario's public colleges and 16 public universities and postsecondary institutions. They are food service workers, professors, counsellors, caretakers, academic support specialists, instructors, information technologists, lab technologists, international student advisors, accessibility advisors, employment consultants, admissions and enrolment officers, financial aid officers, special constables and security, librarians and more.

In an effort to ensure their voices are heard by the Blue Ribbon Panel, OPSEU/SEFPO engaged in a consultative process with current postsecondary education workers. Having done so, we are able to highlight the unique expertise that can only come from current workers who understand the frontline realities of Ontario's public postsecondary education sector.

Ontario's public colleges and universities are a vital component of the province's economy. They promote innovation, and create an informed, engaged citizenry. These critical functions require an increase in stable, core government funding, along with robust mechanisms to ensure quality, such as a commitment to full-time faculty and support staff positions, and collegial governance structures.

We submit the following responses in good faith and look forward to the Panel's final report.

**1. *How could the Ministry of Colleges and Universities' ("the ministry's") funding approach and associated levers (including operating and special purpose grants, student financial assistance, performance-based funding and Strategic Mandate Agreements) best drive institutional excellence? Consideration should be given to:***

- *Increasing program offerings that are labour market relevant and align with employer and local community needs.*
- *Providing sufficient labour market information to help students make informed choices and transition into the labour market.*
- *Responding to students needs/choice and demonstrating value for money.*

The best driver of institutional excellence for Ontario's public colleges and universities is stable core funding. From the individual worker and learner to the institutional level, financial stress does not yield excellence. An institution burdened by financial strain cannot take risks. A researcher who spends their time seeking financial support cannot innovate.

A teacher who is precariously employed cannot inspire. A part-time support staff worker with no benefits has no choice but to seek other employment. A caretaker working without a full complement of colleagues cannot create a safe environment for learning.

Throughout the postsecondary sector, institutions have been working in a state of fiscal strain for over a decade. Since the 2012/13 fiscal year, Ontario's public colleges and universities have experienced funding losses of 24% and 28% respectively from their operating grants. Consistent funds have been replaced by short-term special projects and operating grants that support the whole institution have been replaced by funding for very specific programs. By restoring these grants and allowing public colleges and universities to innovate and educate, the MCU will drive institutional excellence.

The depletion of operating grants, which provide long-term stability and predictability, in favour of short-term project funding has resulted in an increased reliance on precarious employment. Across the public postsecondary sector, more than half of all workers are precariously employed. With precarity comes a lack of access to benefits and sick days, reduced feelings of professional appreciation, and high turnover rates. According to a survey of college workers administered by the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW), this precarity has contributed to many workers reporting their intention to leave their sector entirely (18.2% of survey respondents).

In addition, workers reported significantly higher work demands, emotional demands, work-life imbalance, burnout, and sleep troubles than the general population. This is exacerbated by the negative work environments (e.g., lower trust, lower support, lower recognition) experienced by many of the workers. These factors have been recognized by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety (CCOHS) as being both risk factors for burnout and psychosocial health and safety risks in the workplace.

Across the postsecondary sector, workers tell us about hiring freezes and vacancy management resulting in necessary positions not being filled in a timely manner or at all. This affects the ability of faculty and staff to plan meaningful and intentional programs, support students, maintain safety, and contribute to the communities they serve.

A further threat to institutional or sectoral excellence is the diminishment or lack of collegial governance, academic freedom, and intellectual property protections. These pillars are internationally accepted mechanisms for ensuring transparency, accountability, innovation, and ultimately, excellence. Those who develop, deliver and support academic programs cannot be shut out of academic decisions. Indeed, they should be the leaders in making those decisions. Curricular excellence comes from subject-matter experts and qualified staff who can develop and deliver content as they see best meets the needs of students and the community. When these workers can innovate with academic

freedom and trust that their innovations will be respected through intellectual property protections, we will unleash the true potential of our public postsecondary sector.

Postsecondary institutions regularly engage with local and regional leaders and are well-situated to determine how to best serve their needs. As a result, they ought to be considered individually with Strategic Mandate Agreements that are tailored to their individual settings and communities rather than performance-based metrics that do not represent the true mandate of Ontario's public postsecondary system. In May 2023, the Progressive Conservative led government of Manitoba announced it was abandoning its plan to implement a performance-based funding model after stakeholders noted the consequences of such a move. Linking funding to metrics such as graduation rates, graduate employment earnings etc. reduces student access to postsecondary education, advantages certain institutions and programs over others, and forces public colleges and universities to focus on certain areas rather than having a wholistic perspective on programming.

With respect to student choice, a properly funded public postsecondary system will allow students to choose not only while they are in school but throughout their careers. By offering well-rounded, affordable, and accessible postsecondary curricula throughout the province, students gain transferable skills that result in long-term freedom of choice and expand their personal and professional prospects well into the future.

**2. *Recognizing the local, provincial, national, and global context in which institutions operate and the recommendations of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (OAGO), how do we ensure sustainability through sound institutional financial health practices, continuous improvement and healthy competition in the postsecondary education sector? Consideration could be given to, among others:***

- *Measures that generate revenue*
- *Measures that reduce costs*
- *The governance and accountability framework of institutions to ensure ongoing financial viability*
- *Compensation, talent attraction and incentivizing productivity gains*
- *Credential qualification structures and program architectures*

Ontario's public colleges and universities are contending with the provincial context that has been established through cutting costs in sectors that are core to a provincial government's jurisdiction such as postsecondary education. In the face of growing surpluses and healthy economic growth, the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario has noted a \$0.4 billion spending shortfall in the postsecondary sector, and Ontario maintains the lowest per student postsecondary education funding in Canada. It is the provincial government's responsibility to change the context and revive Ontario's public postsecondary education because the financial health of



the public postsecondary sector cannot be built on a faulty foundation.

Beyond direct funding, the Auditor General's Report on Laurentian University emphasized the importance of collegial governance and the benefits of strong relationships with stakeholders including faculty, staff, and student unions. The collegial governance model promotes transparency, accountability, and curricular quality - among other benefits.

Although generally well-established, though not fully respected, in public universities, Ontario's public colleges lack this model despite the efforts of bargaining units over time. This lack of collegial governance means that faculty may be deliberately shut out of academic decision-making. The public college system would further benefit from academic freedom provisions and intellectual property protections that would allow for true innovation. If sustainability and continuous improvement are the end goals, adopting and fully promoting the use of the collegial governance model, academic freedom, and intellectual property across the public postsecondary sector is a natural step.

Such a move would help ensure every public dollar is spent on educating and supporting students rather than generating surpluses without a transparent plan for their use. Since 2004, Ontario's public colleges have collectively accumulated surpluses of more than \$2.9 billion.

Though surpluses exist, they are not being spent on ensuring Ontario's public colleges and universities are good places to work.

The heavy reliance on precarious and part-time work is not sustainable and results in high turnover, which is costly to the institution. A healthy and safe work force that has access to job security, pensions, benefits, and sick days pays dividends when it comes to ongoing financial viability.

As it pertains to credential qualification structures and program architectures, students in Ontario's public postsecondary system earn qualifications that allow them to enter their chosen profession with confidence. The OAGO's report on the private colleges noted that the same cannot be said for graduates of that system. The report stated that students begin their careers without necessary skills as a result of outdated programs. This could lead to students having to leave their chosen profession or seek additional certifications thereby compounding their financial burden over time. All-the-while, as a result of P3 arrangements, private colleges can benefit by using the good name Ontario's public institutions on their programs knowing full-well that the reputations of Ontario's public postsecondary schools are internationally sound. When education is fully public and not tied to profit, students – and their long-term success - are the focus.

Student success is predicted by multiple factors, but one long-established principle is the balance of challenge and support. A challenging postsecondary curriculum that is developed, delivered, and supported by qualified faculty and staff will engage and inspire; however, that challenge must be balanced by an appropriate level of support that will facilitate the development of



self-efficacy and in an environment that allows for safe intellectual curiosity and practical exploration. The balance is highly individualized to the student and must consider unique learning needs.

Where one of these pillars is out of balance, we face issues with retention and true learning. For example, in the public college system, subject-matter experts develop curricula with an understanding of the learning environment and available support. When that intellectual property is given to a private college and delivered by someone else in a different environment without appropriate support, curricula that are otherwise highly effective become too challenging or, under the watch of a disengaged instructor, too easy for the student. True learning cannot take place under these conditions.

***3. What are the criteria and objectives for a long-term tuition fee framework (TFF)? How can a TFF balance student and institutional needs? What other measures, outside of tuition, could be used to address costs, affordability and access for students?***

As previously mentioned, an institution or an individual cannot thrive while in financial distress. Persistent cuts to core funding, legislated cuts to domestic tuition fees, and ongoing tuition freezes without stable increases to core funding have resulted in a situation wherein Ontario's public colleges and universities have had to rely heavily upon international student tuition. This is not only unsustainable, as noted by several OAGO reports, but

also unethical. In 2020/21, although international students represented 30% of the public postsecondary student population, they represented 68% of total tuition revenue.

The current funding model negatively affects Ontario's public colleges and universities, but also has long-term consequences to the province's economy. While the institutions struggle in an unpredictable funding environment, the cost of offering high-quality postsecondary education has been downloaded to students. Those students then graduate burdened with increasing debt levels, which has long-term negative effects on the broader economy. Students who cannot afford their postsecondary education outright or cannot afford to take on debt, may choose to forego the opportunity altogether. With that, we further stratify Ontario's social economy and send the message that a college or university education is only for those who can afford it. This is a problem that largely performative fee reductions, such as the province's 10% tuition-fee cut, cannot fix. We must start by restoring stable core funding and ensuring Ontario's public postsecondary institutions are accessible by all who want to learn.

True savings and freedom for students come from the revival of the fully accessible and properly funded public postsecondary sector. A student in such a system will graduate having earned a well-rounded education from subject-matter experts while supported by qualified staff. They bring with them transferable knowledge and critical thinking skills that will serve

them well as they enter the workforce with confidence. They will be able to afford to start a business, develop their interests, and take professional risks without being stifled by overwhelming debt. They will not be pigeon-holed into specific fields or stay in a negative employment situation out of necessity. They will be able to afford to take advantage of opportunities for personal development and contribute to their communities and the economy in a variety of ways.

We know that for every dollar invested in postsecondary education results in a return-on-investment of \$1.36. With this in mind, the best way to address costs, increase access for students, and protect Ontario's economy is to make these investments and realize that return.

**4. *What changes to the funding approach could support greater sustainability for northern institutions and students, as well as support specialized institutional excellence amongst northern institutions? In addition to funding considerations, are there innovative delivery/institutional models that should be considered?***

Northern Ontario postsecondary institutions offer unique learning environments with unique considerations. However, this region is also slated to experience a net population loss as a result of youth and young adult out-migration and lower levels of international migration according to Ontario's population projections. While, in many respects, Northern Ontario institutions, like those

in Southern Ontario, require stable core funding, support for transparent collegial governance, and accountability measures that are grounded in the mandate of public colleges and universities rather than performance, where they differ is in their need for unique support given population changes.

If youth are leaving the region and, as the OAGO noted, international students are more likely to attend postsecondary settings in the Greater Toronto Area, then we see that the field is not level and Northern public colleges and universities are at a disadvantage. Northern Ontario institutions have been disproportionately affected by the sector's increasing reliance on international student tuition – unsustainable though it may be – and they require public investment while the sector transitions to restored core funding grants from the province.

In some cases, Northern institutions are obliged to devote their resources to partnerships with disreputable private colleges in the GTA. The only partner Northern, or indeed any, public postsecondary school in Ontario ought to have is the provincial government itself. This is the only partnership that can result in true benefit to this sector.

In addition to being properly funded, Northern Ontario institutions also need to be able to offer local students a reason to stay and for students from other regions or abroad to come. For that to happen, the North needs to be able to offer the same access to public services students would receive elsewhere in the province.

This includes access to healthcare, transportation, internet, and affordable housing. This is not only a benefit to the public colleges and universities but to the province because a vibrant and healthy North is good for Ontario.

As it pertains to innovative delivery models, fully public Northern Ontario postsecondary institutions may be able to offer programming by way of hybrid or flexible online methods. However, while an excellent education through distance and/or a hybrid model is possible, it cannot happen at the expense of quality. Qualified faculty and staff must be at the helm of course development, delivery, and support and workloads and intellectual property must be respected. If done properly, courses that are offered through virtual and/or hybrid means are both professionally demanding and rewarding for learners. They are not a means to save money, circumvent collective agreements, or dilute quality.

***5. How do we ensure a financially sustainable French language education system for FSL and Francophone students so that they have access to a range of quality programs and are prepared for a successful career? Are there innovative delivery/institutional models that should be considered? Could the ministry's funding levers be better/differently employed?***

The French language is a hallmark of public education in Ontario. Whether it be Francophone learners or students learning French as an additional language,

strong French language programming at the postsecondary level allows students to expand their academic, professional, and linguistic horizons. Broad access to such high-quality public programming will allow students to learn in the language of their choice and in the community of their choice. This requires targeted public funding.

In terms of delivery, language education requires immersion not only in the language itself but in its culture. Ontario's Francophone communities have rich and diverse cultures and histories that must be respected. Innovative delivery within a fully public education model would bring in known best practices from in-person, distance, and hybrid instructional design and pedagogy in order to deliver high quality French language instruction. This public programming must be developed, delivered, and supported by qualified faculty and staff who are mindful that quality is of the utmost importance.

***6. What is the role of international students within a sustainable and thriving postsecondary sector? Consideration should be given to the overall quality of the student experience including housing, as well as an assessment of the benefits, risks and opportunities for institutions and the province.***

International students have many roles in a sustainable and thriving public postsecondary sector; however, they cannot fill the gap left by eroded public funding. The OAGO has cited multiple institutions who, as a result of funding shortfalls, have

increased international student tuition and increased their recruitment efforts. According to the OAGO, while international students comprised 30% of public college enrolment in 2020/21, their tuition fees represented 68% of tuition revenue. This revenue source is highly volatile. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic response, international students were not able to enroll in their academic programs and public colleges and universities suffered financially. Similar issues have been realized with other international relations developments over the years.

When combined with the problematic practices of some third-party international student recruitment agencies, the OAGO noted the risks to the reputation of Ontario's public college system altogether. Similar trends can be found in the public university sector where the risks associated with their heavy reliance on international student tuition was cited as among the sources Laurentian University's collapse. In another value-for-money audit of four other public universities, the OAGO found that there was little oversight in the recruitment practices of third-party agencies and called into question the likelihood of successful program completion.

Though the international student population has increased, we cannot assume institutions are prepared. Changes to the funding formula and tuition have taken place over a relatively short period of time. Public colleges and universities have not had the means to adapt to the changing landscape and have, as a result, turned to the recruitment of international students in order to increase revenues. This creates a cycle wherein international students are being recruited for schools in order to fund the services they require upon arrival rather than intentionally developing programs and services and then accepting applications. To do international education well is to offer appropriate curricular and co-curricular support for academics while also ensuring needs such as housing are met.

## Conclusion

OPSEU/SEFPO has a long history with Ontario's public postsecondary system. We signed our first collective agreement for college support staff in 1968. We have been on the frontline of challenging developments for over 50 years together. As we look to the future of our public colleges and universities, We encourage the panel to be honest and forthright with the people of Ontario about what it is really going to take to meet the goals that this panel has put before the sector. Let's make this the report that turns the corner for postsecondary education in Ontario, and starts moving the system in the right direction. We see a true partnership between the provincial government, workers, and students. We see quality public education that is properly funded built on a foundation of collaboration, trust, and respect. This is the future we will work towards.







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