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Report of the Vice-President, University and External Affairs, 2023–2024

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Defending Academic Freedom

Perhaps the most important issue in the last year for this portfolio has been threats to academic freedom, whether on the University of Toronto campus or more broadly. Colleagues will already be aware of the speech given in the Ontario Legislature on October 17, 2023 by Jill Dunlop, Minister of Colleges and Universities, in which she criticized individual professors and students, as well as student unions at U of T and other campuses for their public support for Palestine. The Executive Committee moved quickly to reaffirm UTFA's commitment to "protecting the 'most crucial' rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research, and the right to raise disturbing questions and provocative challenges to cherished beliefs that they entail, is all the more important in times of crisis," referring to the University of Toronto's own Statement of Institutional Purpose. Moreover, we were proud to unite with student and labour unions at U of T to uphold "our collective duty to ensure that [contending and competing] perspectives, so long as they are lawful, continue to be heard, even if they are uncomfortable or even upsetting. This collective duty is meaningless if it does not apply in times of war and if it applies less than fully to those who express solidarity with Palestine."

Compounding these threats to academic freedom is Bill 166, introduced in the Ontario Legislature on February 26, 2024. The bill mandates that all publicly-funded universities have policies regarding student mental health and related services, as well as policies and rules "to address and combat racism and hate, including but not limited to anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia." On the surface, there is nothing objectionable to requiring universities to formulate such policies – which most, if not all, already have! However, it is the bill's third stipulation that is the most worrisome: it would give the Minister the right to issue directives related to the content of such policies. If passed, this bill would mark a major departure from the tradition of autonomy that universities are meant to enjoy. In fact, such autonomy was recently reaffirmed in 2021 in a ruling by the Ontario Court of Appeals

regarding another attempt by the Ford government to interfere with university governance via the failed Student Choice Initiative. In its ruling, the Court noted that the various University Acts define universities as self-governing institutions, and re-affirmed that "institutional autonomy is and has long been the fundamental principle of university governance."

To offer an example of what is at stake with this bill, the University of Toronto struck an Antisemitism Working Group in 2020. After a period of robust consultation, the group issued its report on December 8, 2021. Not only did the report recommend that "[t]he University should frequently reiterate its commitment to academic freedom and inclusion, emphasizing in particular that academic freedom both permits people to say things that other people find troubling and, conversely, entails that individual members of the University are entitled to take whatever position they wish on controversial scientific, cultural, social, political, religious, and historical questions." But also, the report did not adopt a specific definition of antisemitism, whether created by members of the Working Group itself or by external organizations. In fact, the report explicitly connected this decision to the Anti-Black Racism Task Force, which also chose not to adopt a single definition of anti-Black racism. By contrast, if passed, Bill 166 would give the Minister of Colleges and Universities the authority to mandate how universities should define such terms, thus representing a serious threat to academic freedom and university autonomy.

If you would like to express your concern over the proposed bill, please consider signing this letter organized by the Coalition Against Political Interference in Public Research and Education.

University Funding and Scapegoating International Students

Colleagues likely will have noted the recent budget proposed by the Ford government, which includes $1.3 billion in funding for universities and colleges over the next three years. While this may seem like a significant number, it is less than half the amount recommended by Ford's own Blue-Ribbon panel. This failure to provide adequate funding to colleges and universities is consistent with a subtle, but important shift in how the Ford government refers to such educational institutions. No longer are they described as "publicly funded," but rather as "publicly assisted." This suggests the government is only one — and perhaps not even the most important — party responsible for supporting colleges and universities. (See Bill 166, linked to above, for an example of such language.)

In the midst of this ongoing funding crisis, international students have been targeted by federal and provincial governments alike. As the federal government introduced its cap on study permits for international students, it initially suggested this policy was partially in response to the housing crisis and health-care funding gaps in Canada. Rather than address decades of underfunding, the federal government instead suggested international students were partly responsible for these very real challenges. Premier Ford blew this dog whistle again in his announcement of a new medical school in Vaughan, stating he wants to put "our kids first" and to "get rid of the 18%," in reference to the fact that international students comprise about 18% of the total enrolment at Ontario colleges and universities. Ford's office later had to walk back this language, claiming he was only referring to ensuring all the seats at this new medical school go to Canadian students, as if that would have made the claim any more acceptable. But the damage was done, and the strategy was clear. Instead of framing this group of students as "foreign students" and "cash cows," as we have recently seen on our own campus, we need to challenge the exploitation of international students as replacements for appropriate government funding, and work to ensure international students feel welcome and receive all the academic and social supports they need to succeed in Ontario colleges and universities.

Academic Labour Still on the Move

A substantial part of my report last year assessed strikes and other contract campaigns led by faculty associations across Canada. The trend has continued in similar ways since then. This includes several new initiatives to form certified unions, as colleagues have done at l'Université de l'Ontario français and three faculties at McGill University (Law, Education, and Arts). In fact, the Association of McGill Professors of Law (AMPL) has set a strike deadline of April 24, 2024 as it works to negotiate its first collective agreement. We are excited to welcome AMPL President Evan Fox-Decent as part of a panel at this year's AGM on **The State of Play of Academic Labour Activism: Certification and Other Responses to Current Challenges by Faculty in Research-intensive Universities**. Be sure to attend to learn the latest directly from him!

Moreover, as I prepare this report, teaching assistants, sessional lecturers, and graduate assistants represented by CUPE 3903 at York University have reached a tentative agreement after a 7-week strike. The deal includes a sector-leading 14.2% wage increase over three years, as well as other important gains in job security and benefits. This positive outcome at York follows closely on significant wage and other gains won by various units of CUPE 3902 and 3261 at U of T last month. An important feature of this contract campaign was the collaboration of five units within the two locals, sitting together to negotiate at the same bargaining table. Meanwhile, library workers represented by CUPE 1230 are still in negotiations. According to their latest bargaining update, they too, are experiencing delays in information disclosure in their negotiations with the University Administration.

As always, many thanks to UTFA staff for all their work supporting the University and External Affairs portfolio!

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