



University of Toronto Faculty Association

720 Spadina Avenue, Suite 419  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2T9

Telephone: (416) 978-3351  
Fax: (416) 978-7061  
E-mail: [faculty@utfa.org](mailto:faculty@utfa.org)  
Website: [www.utfa.org](http://www.utfa.org)

Hon. Glen Murray  
Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities  
14<sup>th</sup> Floor, Mowat Block  
900 Bay Street  
Toronto, ON M7A 1L2

October 3 2012

Re: MTCU Discussion Paper, *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation, and Knowledge*

Dear Minister:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on and respond to your Ministry's recent discussion paper, *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation, and Knowledge*. I apologize that this letter is arriving after the end of the September deadline announced by the Ministry, but I am sure your team continues to welcome feedback from everyone involved in higher education in Ontario. We have consulted widely with our leadership and membership on the ideas contained in your paper, and we have also had discussions with our University Administration and student groups. Some of the delay in responding is related to internal consultations conducted on a tight timeline at what, for us, is a very busy time of year. I am sure you understand.

The University of Toronto Faculty Association (UTFA) represents approximately 3,000 faculty and librarians at the University of Toronto, including those both currently employed and retired. Our members are proud of the work they do, believing, rightly, that they are key contributors to the excellence in teaching and research for which the University of Toronto is known internationally, and for advancing creativity, sparking innovation, and building knowledge in our province and beyond. The faculty and librarians we represent are also citizens who understand the importance of participating in public debate about policies that guide our sector, and how those policies can be improved in order to contribute to a better and fairer society. Any initiative, such as the Ministry's, designed to encourage reflection on and analysis of the state of PSE in Ontario and Canada is welcome. We support the commitments to excellence and access that we presume motivate the Ministry's thinking.

However, in our considered view, the Ministry's discussion paper fails to make the case for the kind of large-scale reconfiguration of post-secondary education that it says is necessary and demanded by a public "...looking for concrete results from the investment of scarce public resources."

This letter can only summarize our concerns, and we look forward to subsequent opportunities to expand upon the points made here.

First, the evident drive toward standardization of programs across the province as outlined in the paper carries real dangers. Standardization, if taken too far, risks threatening one of the great strengths and points of pride of the PSE system in Ontario: its variety. Excellence in teaching and research is based in part on institutional distinctiveness, one of the critical factors attracting top academic staff and students to particular universities. For the University of Toronto, a university with a truly international and deserved reputation for excellence, the paper's one-size-can-fit-all approach is particularly troubling and makes little sense. In this light, any policy aimed simply at common denominators could weaken rather than strengthen not just the U of T, but the entire system.

Second, we are very concerned about the way research is positioned in the discussion. Research is a *sine qua non* of the values of creativity, innovation, and knowledge mentioned in the title. Yet the Ministry offers almost no serious discussion at all of the significance of research in our sector's profile. (In fact, the word itself appears only five times, primarily in passing or non-substantive ways). This is perhaps the paper's most significant problem. For a research intensive university such as the U of T, the failure to properly consider research seriously reduces the value of the paper as any guide for our future.

The document's relative silence on research presents two large problems:

1. It creates the impression that, to the extent research is upheld as worthy, it is only when it is directed into commercial applications that it matters at all. This approach ignores the profound importance of curiosity-driven and truly free or basic research. History has shown often enough that such research may ultimately result in commercial applications, but that an open-ended rather than an instrumental orientation is crucial. And, to use a cliché, not all that is valuable has a price. The paper's view of the value of our sector is dangerously narrow.
2. The paper's silence on research means it misses the critical synergies that emerge between teaching and research, one of the core organizing principles of research intensive universities. This in turn means the paper fails to build on an existing strength in PSE when considering, for example, standardized or transportable courses. At numerous universities, including our own, undergraduate and graduate programs are designed with the distinctive strengths of the faculty in mind. Thus, the paper's almost casual suggestion that introductory courses by subject area can be easily standardized across institutions is misleading. Such courses are often developed as part of integrated programs that are institutionally distinct, reflecting the specific strengths of faculty at those institutions. As an example, introductory biology courses are not standardized across the three campuses of the U of T. That is because the respective programs in biology, biological sciences, and life sciences are developed with differing objectives in mind and based on

different expertise among the faculty. This differentiation is a strength, not a weakness; it reflects a specific example of how teaching and research may be mutually reinforcing. The paper simply does not entertain the possibility of such synergies, yet for many of us, they are a central fact of our professional lives.

Further, the paper's weakness in recognizing and proposing to build on research strengths in our sector and at our institution makes the paper hard to place in ongoing discussions about research and technological development policy in Canada. This is in spite of the document's repeated references to innovation and technology and the production of labour-market credentials. One may find, by contrast, a much more nuanced and thoughtful discussion of these larger issues in U of T President David Naylor's article in the August 2012 issue of *Policy Options*. The thin policy analysis offered in the MTCU paper is surprising and disappointing. If Ontario and Canada are to keep pace with the likes of Germany and the UK, investments must be made in a strategic way. Ontario still does not have an overall strategic direction linking higher education and advanced research; the paper fails to address this gap.

Third, we are concerned about the agenda for transforming teaching offered in the paper. We have a particular concern about the push to online instruction. We note that online content and teaching are already here and expanding on many fronts. Many of us are embracing innovation in teaching, using online delivery methods. And the U of T has embraced online teaching in significant ways at an institutional level. Our library system has been a world leader in transitioning to electronic resources in support of teaching and research. Moreover, the discussion in our sector has already moved beyond the terms offered in the paper in significant respects. There is vigorous debate about whether online instruction actually encourages convergent as opposed to divergent thinking, and whether or not the supposed economies of scale in online teaching can actually be realized. The paper does not seem to recognize the distinction between different modes of teaching, nor does it acknowledge that educational quality relies primarily on the content of a course (offered in whatever respective medium) and the quality of instruction. Even in large lecture class settings, students and faculty alike report on the very lively, dynamic and interactive experience of being in a lecture hall in contrast to the relatively flat and isolated experience typical of online modes of delivery. And the simple fact is that some forms of instruction do not scale up or translate easily into online and distance education. So here, too, the impulse toward conformity avoids key issues.

Moreover, we note that three-year degrees and year-round teaching already exist and can work effectively, here and at other institutions. A more wholesale embrace, however, could produce undesirable consequences. Compression of degree courses could result in 'dumbing down' programs, reducing the value of the degrees obtained with consequences that undermine the Ministry's apparent goals. And rushing all students through ignores the great variety of students' lived realities and needs. Thousands of students struggle to gain access to PSE and then to integrate and reconcile busy academic schedules with other commitments to family and work. It's not clear that mandating three-year degrees across the system serves such men and women well at all, ironic given that improving accessibility is one of the paper's goals. Moreover, the work many students undertake often takes place in the in the summer months, helping to offset the costs of post-secondary education but also

contributing to Ontario's important seasonal economy. There is no evidence these issues have been considered by the paper's authors.

In short, there are serious pedagogical questions raised by the discussion paper, but their complexity is not appreciated nor, with respect, does it seem they are even understood. It is too easy to make passing references to things like the Bologna accord, as if that document somehow legitimizes the paper's proposals. One hopes that the controversy raging in Europe over the Bologna accord gives the Ministry pause.

Fourth, the paper is entirely silent on the issue of academic freedom. This is disquieting. I submit there is need for the government to recognize and reinforce the importance of academic freedom and autonomy at the level of individual institutions. Government support for independent universities that are otherwise free to shape curriculum and research agendas, and to conduct teaching and research activities without undue influence from third parties (including the government), is an essential feature of our post-secondary system, and of our democratic and civil society. Academic freedom, contrary to tired public caricatures, does not mean that faculty and librarians should be able to say, write, and do whatever they want in their teaching and research, independent of public scrutiny or accountability. Rather, academic freedom entails the unencumbered right for faculty and librarians to draw from their particular expertise in conducting teaching and research activities free of coercion or constraint by third parties, and to have reasonable and rigorous opportunity to shape the circumstances under which those activities take place. These are long-standing principles that underpin universities in Ontario and elsewhere. They help to ensure that the training and creativity of our faculty and librarians, as well as our students, is put to best use, for the benefit of all. The free search for truth and its free exposition are essential to the development of knowledge and understanding, and to the training of critically and creatively enabled minds that represent the future of this province and this country. Promoting far-reaching changes to Ontario's PSE sector without one mention of academic freedom is one of the paper's greatest failings.

Let me end by commenting on one other problem with the paper. In all the talk and jargon about "productivity", and the mantra-like repetition of the word "innovation", there is but one single reference to the most important intellectual component of any PSE system, and its civilizing purpose: at the bottom of page 9, the phrase "critical thinking and wisdom" is used, once, then disappears. In this context, and as you invoke without definition the imperative to improve productivity, you should consider that the volume of students taught by faculty in our sector has increased over the last decade by over twenty percent, while funding per student has declined, and support for faculty and librarian complement and institutional infrastructure has also dipped. We have been making do with less for some time now, one of the most conventional measures of increased productivity. But the facts of our sector suggest it is already dangerously lean. Rhetorical calls for productivity increases as offered in the paper, in this context, and to be blunt, represent nothing short of an unwelcome affront.

To summarize: I respectfully suggest that the absence of serious reflection on the role of research in Ontario's PSE system; the unreflective drive toward standardization, compressed degrees, and online courses; and the evident lack of understanding of critical intellectual and pedagogical questions about the future of education and research – taken together

demonstrate that the discussion paper is not the roadmap we need. Our faculty association adds its voice to the many others you are hearing that suggest a new conversation is needed, based on new thinking and policy debate, and genuine and thoughtful dialogue between representatives of our sector and your Ministry premised first on the inherent strengths already in our system. Only by these means can we move forward.

Sincerely,

Scott Prudham  
President