

Strong, stable funding for Ontario's universities *An investment in the future*

OCUFA's 2022 pre-budget submission

January 26, 2022



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

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Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA)

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations has been the provincial voice of university faculty since 1964. OCUFA represents over 17,000 professors, academic librarians, and other academic professionals in 30 faculty associations across Ontario.

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It's time to invest in Ontario's universities

Universities are vital institutions within our communities and in the province. They deliver education to thousands of students, create vibrant campus communities, produce thought-provoking and groundbreaking research that drives innovation, provide good jobs that support local economies, and provide solutions to society's most pressing problems. Government commitment to postsecondary education is essential for sustaining these institutions and their contributions to Ontario's economic, social, and cultural health, and is more important than ever given the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need for post-pandemic recovery.

The last few years have been particularly challenging times for universities in Ontario, and it is critical for the government to intervene and adequately fund the future of public postsecondary education in Ontario at this juncture.

This year's budget is an opportunity to start Ontario on a path that prioritizes quality education for students, innovative research, and fairness for the province's contract faculty. The knowledge our universities produce and the good jobs they provide support our local communities, fuel the provincial economy, and address the most pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges facing our province. By investing in accessible postsecondary education, we are investing in Ontario's future and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary of recommendations

OCUFA sets out recommendations in this brief that provide a modest starting point for addressing decades of underfunding.

OCUFA's recommendations for the 2022 Ontario Budget aim to preserve the quality and sustainability of postsecondary education in Ontario through stable, consistent, and adequate funding, as well as improved working conditions for university faculty. Public funding of universities in Ontario is at record low levels, while tuition fees are high, and academic work is becoming increasingly precarious. Ontario university faculty are extremely concerned about the impact of these alarming trends on the accessibility and quality of postsecondary education.

1. Increase per-student public investment in Ontario's universities to improve Ontario's rank by one spot among other provinces by 2026-27.
Cost in 2022-23: \$460 million.
2. Reverse the unstable and inequitable performance-based university funding model and revert to the largely effective enrolment-based funding model.
Cost in 2022-23: Substantial savings for government and university administrations through reduced red tape.
3. Implement meaningful increases to Ontario's Northern and Bilingual Grants, special purpose funding (particularly for Indigenous programming and supports), and research funding.
Cost in 2022-23: \$95.5 million distributed as:
 - ▶ **A \$6.5 million investment in the Northern Ontario Grant to offset inflation since 2002-03;**
 - ▶ **A \$12.5 million investment in the Bilingualism Grant to offset inflation since 2007-08;**
 - ▶ **A \$1.5 million investment in Indigenous education and training to offset inflation since 2009-10; and**
 - ▶ **A \$75 million investment to bring Ontario's research funding in line with the average for the rest of Canada.**
4. Launch a multi-year faculty renewal strategy that supports meaningful long-term change to improve Ontario's student-to faculty ratio by one spot among other provinces by 2026-27. This strategy should encourage universities to undertake additional full-time tenure-stream hiring over and above their current planned growth, and direct funds towards transitioning existing contract faculty into secure full-time positions.
Cost in 2022-23: \$350 million to support universities across the province hiring approximately 1,405 additional full-time tenure-stream faculty.
5. Increase OSAP funding and turn student loans into grants.
OCUFA supports student associations' calls and budget recommendations on this.

Adequate funding for sustainable universities

Strong and stable public funding is essential for maintaining excellence in teaching and research in Ontario's universities. Universities are unique spaces created to facilitate advanced education and research. They are publicly funded because they produce a vital public good: new knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world, as well as solutions to society's most pressing problems as scientific research has shown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The absence of reliable and adequate funding drives universities towards short-term cost-saving measures and unstable alternative funding sources, thus undermining the long-term planning, programming, and investments that are vital to the education, research, and social mandate of universities.

To maintain a high-quality, competitive postsecondary education system in Ontario, the government needs to provide increased university operating funding that closes the growing funding gap with other provinces. Unless the government commits to changing the decade-long trend of defunding postsecondary education in our province, Ontario's universities are due to lag even further behind the rest of the country, which will further limit their role in Ontario's economic recovery.

Impact of COVID-19 in the university sector

Similar to most workplaces in Ontario, universities have been severely impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis.

In February 2021, the Council of Ontario Universities reported a loss of over \$1 billion in the university sector due to COVID-19 related costs and loss of revenue. The report noted the need for an immediate government investment of at least \$500 million in the sector to allow for cost recovery and healthy operation of Ontario's public universities.

In March 2021, the Ontario government provided \$106.4 million as one-time funding for universities and colleges in Ontario, with \$44 million allocated to universities. Unfortunately, this amount is less than 10 per cent of the shortfall the Council of Ontario Universities identified. Further, nearly one year has passed since that one-time funding transfer and universities continue to face pandemic-related costs and losses. The chronic underfunding of Ontario's universities for over the past decade has made them particularly vulnerable to the pandemic and a one-time payment is not enough make-up the difference.

As more universities prepare for a return to on-campus activities once it is safe to do so, it is even more imperative that universities in the province be allocated with the funding required to provide the necessary health and safety measures needed to protect faculty, students, staff and the campus community. Further, it is especially important to include mental health supports, as the pandemic heavily weighs on faculty, students, and all members of the campus community.

Over the past year, the government has failed to respond to calls from all major stakeholders in the postsecondary sector to provide public universities with adequate financial supports. In fact, the latest report from the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario noted that over the first six months of the

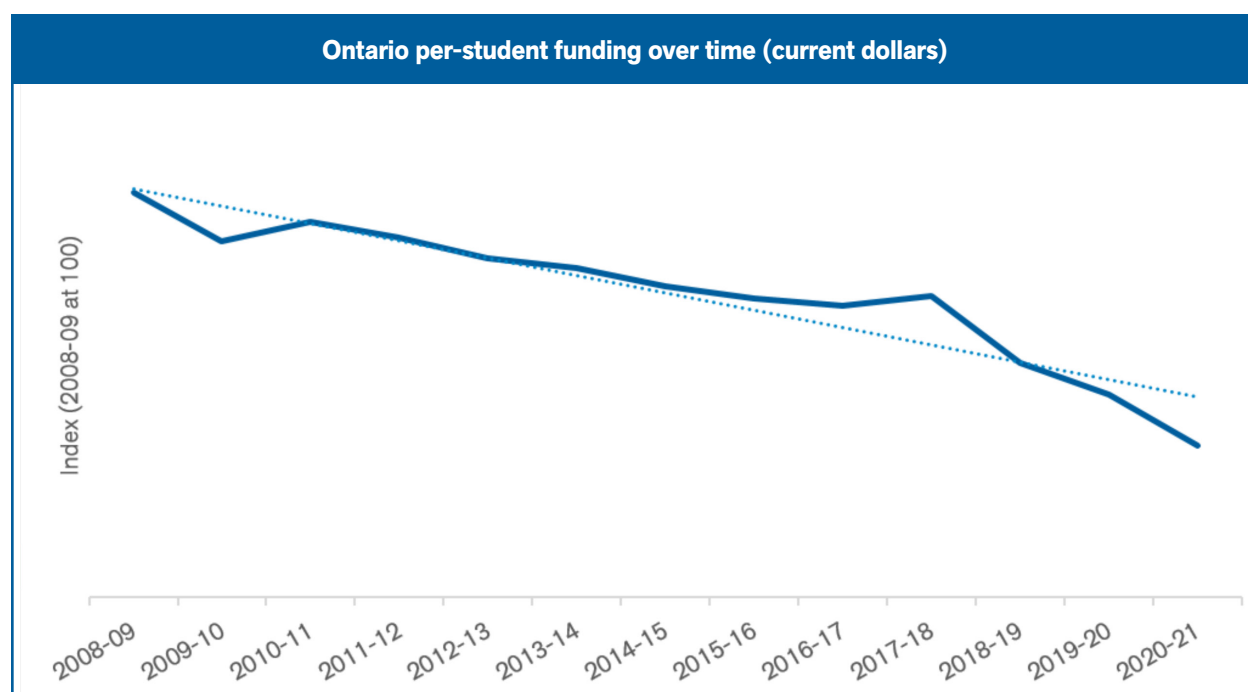
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2021-22 fiscal year, the government spent \$41.3 billion less than planned. Further, the 2021 budget failed to adequately invest in Ontario's universities to put them on secure financial footing.

The 2022 budget is an opportunity for the government to make a meaningful investment in Ontario's recovery by recognizing the integral role universities play in the fiscal, social, and cultural revival needed after this pandemic.

The decade-long postsecondary funding crisis

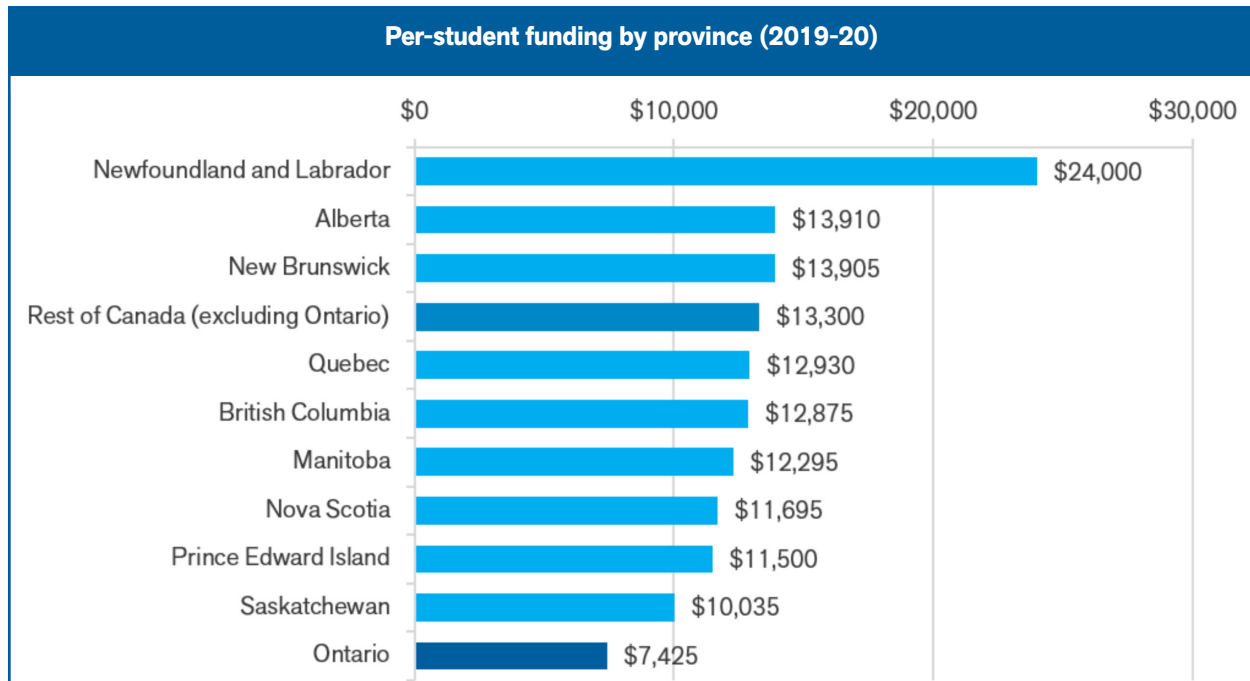
For over a decade, there has been an erosion of public funding and investment in Ontario's university sector. Considered on a per-student basis (per "eligible" student, as defined by government), inflation-adjusted operating allocations from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities have been falling since 2008-09. As a result, Ontario's universities are currently the lowest funded in Canada and this situation has continuously worsened over the last decade.



In the Canadian context, Ontario's per-student funding levels now sit 43 per cent behind the rest of the country. In 2019-20, the last year for which data is available, the average level of per-student funding in Ontario was \$7,425 compared to \$12,930 for the rest of the country.

This clearly and unquestionably demonstrates the declining state of postsecondary education funding in Ontario and the damaging results of a decade of austerity measures, flawed policymaking, and the misguided priorities of successive provincial governments. Together, they have left Ontario trailing the rest of the country and falling further behind each year.

Strong, stable funding for Ontario's universities



Stagnating funding is forcing universities to stretch existing resources even thinner and is putting them at a clear disadvantage when it comes to investing in the teaching and research excellence that is vital to the success of Ontario's university students.

However, this downward trend can be stopped. What Ontario needs is a bold and meaningful investment in our higher education system, one that matches the severity of the funding crisis. The 2022 budget is an opportunity to break from years of stagnating funding to ensure that neither access to, nor the quality of a university education is compromised. It is an opportunity to demonstrate to the people of Ontario that this government believes in higher education, research, and good jobs.

A sensible step in the right direction would be to improve Ontario's level of per-student funding to match the next worst province, Nova Scotia. This would require an investment of an additional \$8.2 billion over five years, starting with an additional \$460 million in this year's budget.

Renewed investment in Ontario's universities over the next five years must be part of a long-term commitment to a robust system of public funding for postsecondary education. It is time to set our

Cost of pulling Ontario out of last place in per-student university funding					
	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
Annual increase	\$460 million	\$515 million	\$585 million	\$660 million	\$750 million
Cummulative increase	\$460 million	\$1.4 billion	\$3 billion	\$5.2 billion	\$8.2 billion

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province on an upward trend, demonstrating to Ontario's students that they deserve an equitable, stable, and high-quality learning experience comparable to that of students in the rest of Canada.

It is important to recognize that public funding of universities truly is an investment. Previous reports by the Conference Board of Canada have shown that economies that invest in their population's education and skills development receive direct social and economic benefit through higher tax revenues and lower social transfer costs. Therefore, a meaningful investment in our higher education system is not only a good investment but a vital one for the future of our society and economy.

Investing in research and special purpose funds

Northern Ontario universities face unique financial and program challenges as a result providing university educational and research programs suited to the needs of the specific geographical location, population, and social, cultural and economic factors present in the extensive geographical area they serve. The unique mandates of northern universities and their particular circumstances result in challenges that are not shared by other universities in the province. It is important to note that the Northern Ontario University Grant has been created to specifically address the challenges faced by Ontario's northern universities.

This vital source of funding, however, has been stagnant for over a decade with no increases or adjustments to keep up with inflation. Similarly, the government has failed to ensure that funding for the Bilingual Grant and the Special Purpose Funding envelope keep up with the growing student body and the needs of institutions.

Additionally, for several years now, per-student research funding in Ontario has not kept up with the average for the rest of the country. In fact, on a per-student basis, research funding in the province is currently at less than half of the rest of Canada average.

OCUFA recommends that the 2022 budget include:

- ▶ A meaningful increase to northern and bilingual grants in recognition of the important mandate of northern and bilingual universities and the particular challenges they face. A sensible first step would be the investment of an additional \$6.5 million in the Northern Ontario Grant to offset inflation since 2002-03 and an additional \$12.5 million in the Bilingualism Grant to offset inflation since 2007-08.
- ▶ An increase in special purpose funding, particularly to support funds provided for Indigenous education and training, institutional grants, and indigenous initiatives and programming. An investment of \$1.5 million in the fund would be required to offset inflation since 2009-10.
- ▶ Increased funding for research under the Ministry of Colleges and Universities' research funding envelope. An additional \$75 million investment in this year's budget will be required to bring Ontario's in line with the average funding level for the rest of Canada.

A reckless performance-based funding model

Unfortunately, the outcomes and market-based performance funding model the government is looking to implement will not solve any of the funding challenges currently facing postsecondary education in Ontario and will, in fact, exacerbate the system's current funding crisis.

In April 2019, the government announced a drastic shift in the current funding model towards an outcomes and market-based approach that would tie 60 per cent of postsecondary funding (over \$3 billion across all universities and colleges) to a set of performance metrics, most of which these institutions have little to no control over. This dramatic and potentially destabilizing shift follows years of stagnant public funding for postsecondary education in Ontario.

Faculty across the province are deeply concerned about the impact of this funding model on the province's postsecondary education system. Without any consultation with sector stakeholders, this government is ignoring sound public policy and imposing its own destabilizing ideological framework on Ontario's postsecondary education system.

Earlier in the pandemic, the Ontario government announced its intention to postpone the introduction of performance-based funding for a year and later announced that the performance-based funding model would be further delayed for two years until 2022.

This is an implicit recognition by the government of the flawed nature of performance-based funding models. The COVID-19 crisis has brought to focus the serious inequities, instabilities, and distortions embedded within this funding formula that holds universities accountable for measures they have no control over.

OCUFA continues to call for scrapping the performance-based funding model altogether and to advocate for a fully-funded accessible and quality postsecondary education system in Ontario.

Performance-based funding: A flawed model

A wide body of research shows that performance-based funding is incapable of credibly reflecting or evaluating the breadth and depth of a student's education, the long-term benefits of basic research projects, or the contributions of a faculty or staff member. Instead, research shows that this funding model is far more likely to have negative consequences—slowly but certainly eroding the integrity of Ontario's postsecondary education system.

By design, performance-based funding rewards institutions that meet specific targets while penalizing those that do not. In doing so, it denies vital funding to the institutions that need it most to improve their educational outcomes. In effect, rather than encouraging institutions to improve in areas where they are not meeting targets, this approach will ensure institutions fall further behind.

This reckless approach to funding provides only the illusion of accountability but is a very real threat to equity, accessibility, and the quality of postsecondary education. It will work against quality

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improvement and do nothing to improve accountability, as Ontario's universities already have comprehensive structures in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs they offer.

Performance-based funding undermines equity and access

Evidence suggests that performance-based funding models pose a serious threat to equity and diversity, which will be especially devastating for smaller Ontario universities and will undermine access for Indigenous students and other equity-seeking groups.

A recent study has shown that, when compared to larger research schools, minority-serving institutions are, on average, more likely to be negatively impacted by performance-based funding models. This has resulted in several of these institutions revisiting and altering their approach to admitting students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. Performance-based funding hinders access to higher education, especially for marginalized students, and penalizes universities that seek to enroll underrepresented students.

Other adverse consequences include shorter programs with less quality control, lower graduation requirements, increased hiring of precariously employed contract faculty, increased campus bureaucracy, and less institutional autonomy as government exercises more influence over which programs are offered.

Furthermore, the metrics set by the Ontario Government for assessing each university's "performance" are almost solely focused on economic factors and labour market demands, which will likely institutionalize existing social inequities. They include no measures of the teaching, research, or social impact of universities, all of which are essential to their missions and mandates. These impacts cannot simply be measured through economic contributions, but must also take into account the contributions that postsecondary education makes to building knowledge, fostering innovative and critical thinking minds, and creating more equitable and inclusive societies.

These metrics and the complicated cyclical reporting mechanisms they require will lead to increased bureaucracy for the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and postsecondary institutions. Universities will now have to allocate substantial resources to monitor, measure, and report on a number of metrics, most of which their institutions have no control over. In a time of austerity and in the midst of a funding crisis that has had drastic impacts on the learning conditions of Ontario students and working conditions of university faculty, it is absolutely irresponsible of the government to create an unstable and unpredictable funding system that forces universities to direct their resources away from their core mandate of teaching and learning and towards meaningless bureaucratic measures and reporting schemes.

The way forward

Rather than engage in risky and destabilizing changes to Ontario's postsecondary education funding formula, the government should instead put students first and invest in the province's universities.

Strong, stable funding for Ontario's universities

Evidence shows that, even in the absence of explicit performance goals or financial incentives, completion rates increase when institutions receive additional resources.

Adequate, stable public funding for postsecondary education will help students by ensuring better academic support services, sustainable faculty-to-student ratios, and lower tuition fees—all of which are effective ways to increase degree attainment. Public funding for universities also supports good jobs on campus by providing institutions with resources to invest in faculty renewal and hire precariously employed contract faculty and staff into secure full-time positions.

Higher education should foster creative, curious, and critical minds. It should provide students with the support, opportunity, and inspiration to push forward in the quest for knowledge and understanding. Outcome and market-based performance funding measures undermine these values and the very purpose of universities.

Funding allocation mechanisms should not be structured in ways that harm the student learning experience. As the government moves forward with its funding allocations for the third round of Strategic Mandate Agreements, it should abandon its plans to link performance metrics to funding. The evidence clearly shows that they will fail to help the government achieve its goals and are likely to do real damage to postsecondary education in Ontario. Instead, the data being collected should be leveraged to identify better ways for universities to improve their educational quality and research outputs.

Faculty renewal and fairness for contract faculty

Professors and academic librarians are at the heart of Ontario's vibrant universities. They teach courses, mentor students, and conduct research that expands knowledge and drives innovation. Their role is central to the mission and mandate of Ontario's universities and to driving the economy.

For over a decade, student enrolment has far outpaced full-time faculty hiring at Ontario's public universities. This has put a strain on academic institutions across the province and introduced an alarming shift in academic labour. Today, a majority of courses at Ontario universities are taught by precariously employed faculty who face constant job insecurity and unfair working conditions. In the face of declining funding levels, Ontario universities have turned to hiring more and more contract academics to fill the growing gap between student enrolment and full-time faculty hiring. This unsustainable approach has already proven to have disastrous consequences both for faculty and students.

The Ontario Government should take leadership by making a province-wide commitment to faculty renewal that includes fairness for contract faculty, new full-time tenure-stream hiring, and the replacement of retiring tenured faculty members with new tenured positions. This approach will ensure the sustainability and quality of Ontario's universities.

A sensible step in the right direction would be to improve Ontario's student-to-faculty ratio by one rank to match the next worst province, Manitoba.

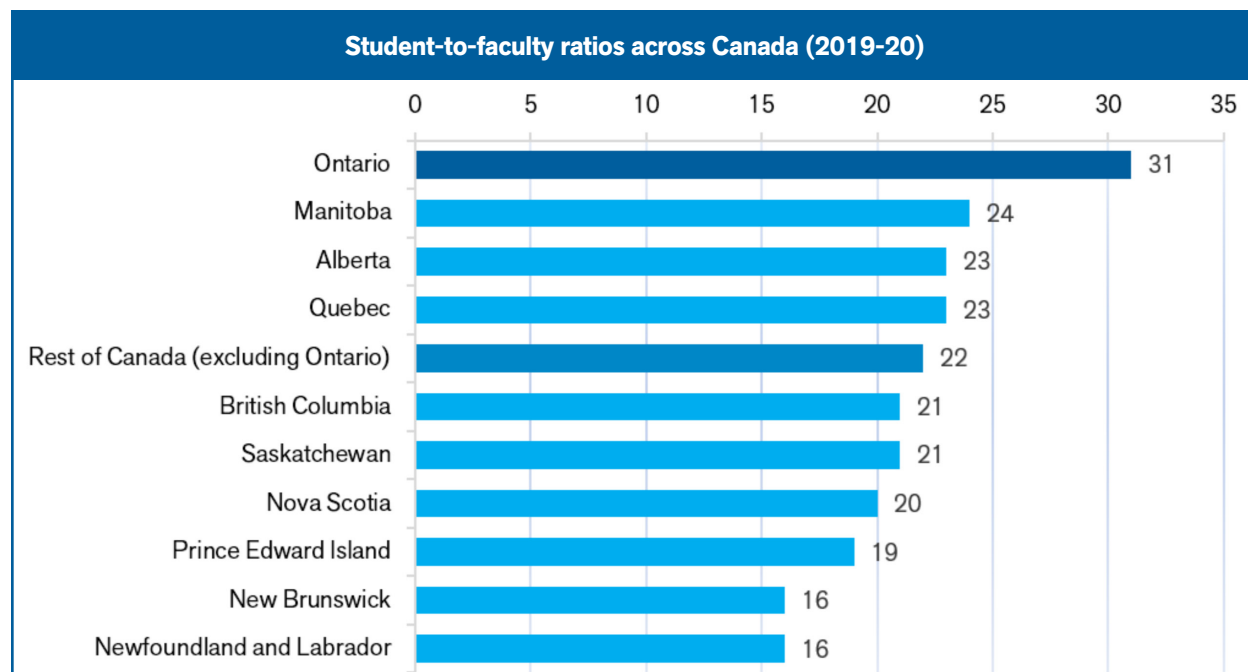
Alarming rise of the student-to-faculty ratio

Ontario has the highest student-to-faculty ratio in Canada and since 2000 that ratio has worsened substantially—increasing by more than 42 per cent. As of 2019-20, there were 31 students for every full-time faculty member at an Ontario university, compared to an average of 22 students for each university faculty member across the rest of Canada.

These trends have a negative impact on teaching and learning in Ontario. Having more students and fewer professors leads to substantially larger class sizes, less one-on-one engagement, and fewer opportunities for mentorship and academic advising. These concerns are reflected in the number of first year course sections offered by Ontario universities. The latest data on class sizes from Common University Data Ontario (CUDO) show that the number of courses with 30 students or less at Ontario universities was 14 per cent lower in 2017 (the last year of available data) than it was in 2007. By comparison, over the same period, the number of courses offered with 250 students or more rose by a stark 25 per cent and the number of courses offered with 101-250 students was 14 per cent higher.

This data speaks to the gradually eroding quality of the learning experience available to Ontario university students and the declining opportunities for mentorship and one-on-one engagement with their educators as a result of years of chronic underfunding.

To address this growing problem in our higher education system, the provincial government must commit to a faculty renewal strategy for Ontario's universities. This strategy should also ensure that



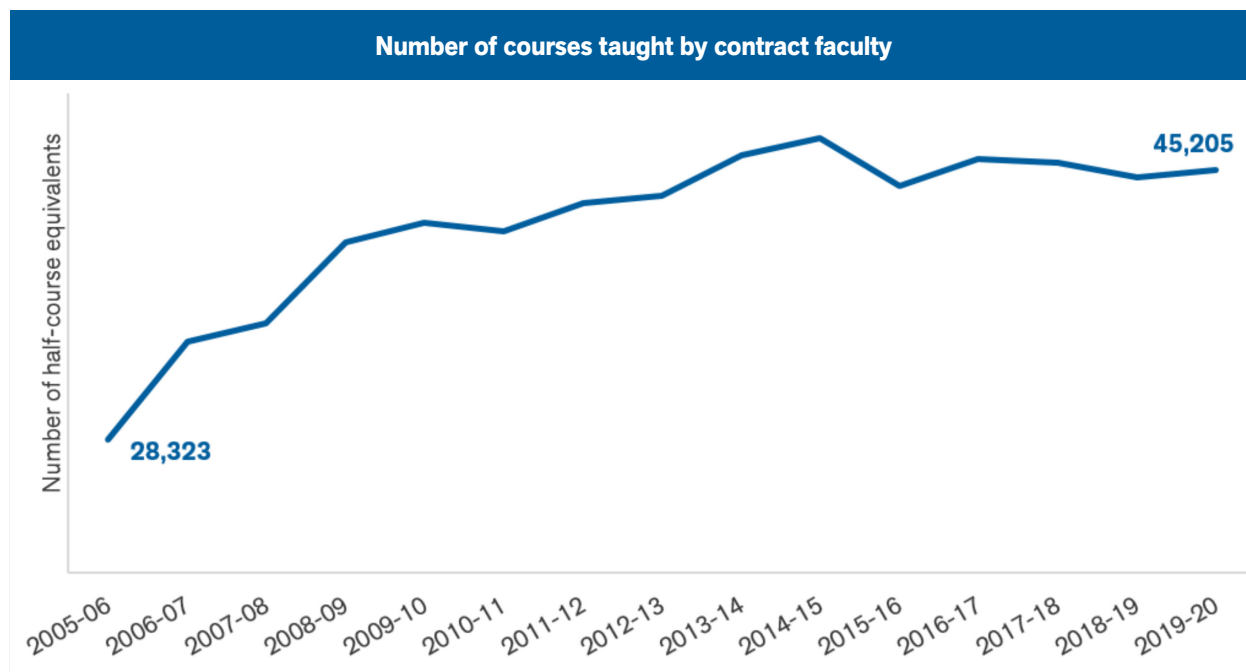
retiring tenured faculty members are replaced with new tenure-stream positions, that pathways are created for contract faculty to attain secure positions at their institutions, and that the reliance on contract faculty in the system as a whole is reduced.

Reliance on precarious academic labour: An unsustainable approach

The decline in public funding and the resulting rise in the student-to-faculty ratio has paved the way for a dramatic and troubling shift in the nature of academic work at Ontario's postsecondary institutions. While full-time tenure-stream faculty hiring has stagnated, the reliance on contract faculty, initially a temporary stopgap measure to accommodate significant enrolment increases in the early 2000s, has become an entrenched strategy in universities across the province. These contract faculty members are generally hired on either a limited-term contract or as sessionals on a per-course basis.

Over half of faculty at Ontario universities are now working on contract. OCUFA estimates that the number of courses they teach has nearly doubled since 2000. These faculty lack job security, are regularly paid less than their tenure-stream colleagues for performing the same work, face unpredictable scheduling, and often juggle jobs at multiple institutions. This lack of job security means these individuals struggle to make long-term plans for themselves and their families. While some contract faculty are professionals who teach on the side, research suggests that most rely on teaching as their primary employment and aspire to have secure full-time positions in the academy. Further, the majority of contract faculty are women, making fairness for contract faculty an issue of equity.

It is widely acknowledged that sessional faculty are too often paid less than their tenure-stream colleagues for performing work of equal value. In addition, many do not have access to benefits or



pensions. While the expectations of university teaching done by sessional faculty and tenure-stream faculty are the same, sessionals are not being compensated on an equal basis. Moreover, while most contract faculty are only paid for teaching, many continue to do unpaid research and service to remain competitive for future positions. Yet, despite taking on this work, contract faculty do not have access to the same resources as their full-time tenure-stream colleagues, including access to libraries and research funding.

With the government's imposition of a one per cent wage cap, contract faculty are at further risk. Their already low real incomes will decrease further, since inflation rates outpace the government's legislated wage cap.

Filling the gap between enrolment and tenure-stream faculty hiring with more contract faculty in precarious jobs is not an acceptable path forward. Contract faculty are highly qualified teachers and researchers, but their conditions of work do not allow them to contribute to their fullest potential in the classroom or provide the educational continuity students deserve. Job insecurity reduces their ability to follow through with students and provide them with the ongoing support and guidance that will help them excel.

Public support for secure full-time faculty hiring

There is broad public support for setting Ontario's universities on a path towards hiring faculty in secure full-time positions that will provide the learning experience students deserve.

A poll commissioned by OCUFA showed that 94 per cent of Ontarians believe universities should be model employers and support good jobs in their communities. Ontarians also support improvements to the working conditions of contract faculty—over 84 per cent think contract faculty should receive fair pay, access to benefits, and be converted into secure full-time positions. Universities are well-placed to provide good, stable jobs in our communities.

Faculty renewal as a priority

The provincial government must take leadership and set a standard for the future of postsecondary education that recognizes the importance of decent, stable jobs at universities. The province must support increased tenure-stream faculty hiring and replacement through the provision of adequate public funding for universities across the province. Professors' working conditions are students' learning environments and faculty renewal will ensure that every student in Ontario has access to a high-quality university education.

An effective faculty renewal strategy must have the dual goals of increasing the tenure-stream faculty complement and delivering fairness for contract faculty. This requires an expansion in the overall size of the tenure-stream faculty complement and supports improvements to Ontario's student-to-faculty ratio.

A faculty renewal strategy must create pathways for contract faculty to attain more secure positions at their institutions and reduce the reliance on contract faculty in the system as a whole. The creation of new positions must also preserve the principle of tenure and the fundamental connection between teaching, research, and service within the academic profession. Action on this issue will ensure that future scholars are not denied the opportunity to contribute to our communities through research, teaching, and innovation.

While hiring decisions are made by each university, the government can and must take leadership on this issue by setting direction and encouraging universities to invest in hiring more tenure-stream faculty.

A faculty renewal strategy can also help to ensure that retiring tenured faculty members are replaced with new tenure-stream positions. Too often, when tenured faculty members retire, departments will turn to precariously employed contract faculty members to take over the teaching responsibilities and leave the remaining tenure-stream faculty members to pick up the slack on university service

FACULTY RENEWAL STRATEGY



Create additional full-time tenure-stream faculty positions



Close gap between full-time faculty hiring and student enrolment



Improve student-to-faculty ratio and enrich student learning experience



Support pathways for contract faculty into secure full-time positions

Strong, stable funding for Ontario's universities

responsibilities. This, in turn, limits the time faculty have available for teaching and research, which provides justification for even further reliance on contract faculty members.

Without institutional assurances that retiring faculty will be replaced, the future of small departments and programs is often uncertain. Again and again, we hear retiring professors express concern that the quality or survival of their programs or departments will be jeopardized. It is against this background that eligible faculty are making decisions about when to retire. A faculty renewal strategy can help achieve a robust, self-renewing tenure-stream faculty complement.

In this year's budget, the government should launch a faculty renewal strategy backed by a multiyear investment to support meaningful long-term change. This strategy should encourage universities to undertake additional tenure-stream hiring, over and above their current planned growth, and direct funds towards transitioning existing contract faculty into secure full-time positions. Given that many of these matters are governed by collective agreements, the logistics and specifics of faculty hiring would have to be worked out at individual universities.

To improve the student-to-faculty ratio by a modest margin and get Ontario to the student-to-faculty ratio of the next worst province, OCUFA estimates that 8,080 full-time professors would need to be hired by 2026-27. Hiring at this level should be supported by increased public investment and would cost universities approximately \$2.6 billion over four years—beginning with a \$350 million investment to support 1,405 additional positions in 2022-23. With this level of investment, Ontario could reach a student-to-faculty ratio of 22 students per faculty member by 2027.

Tuition and student assistance

Tuition fees as a threat to access

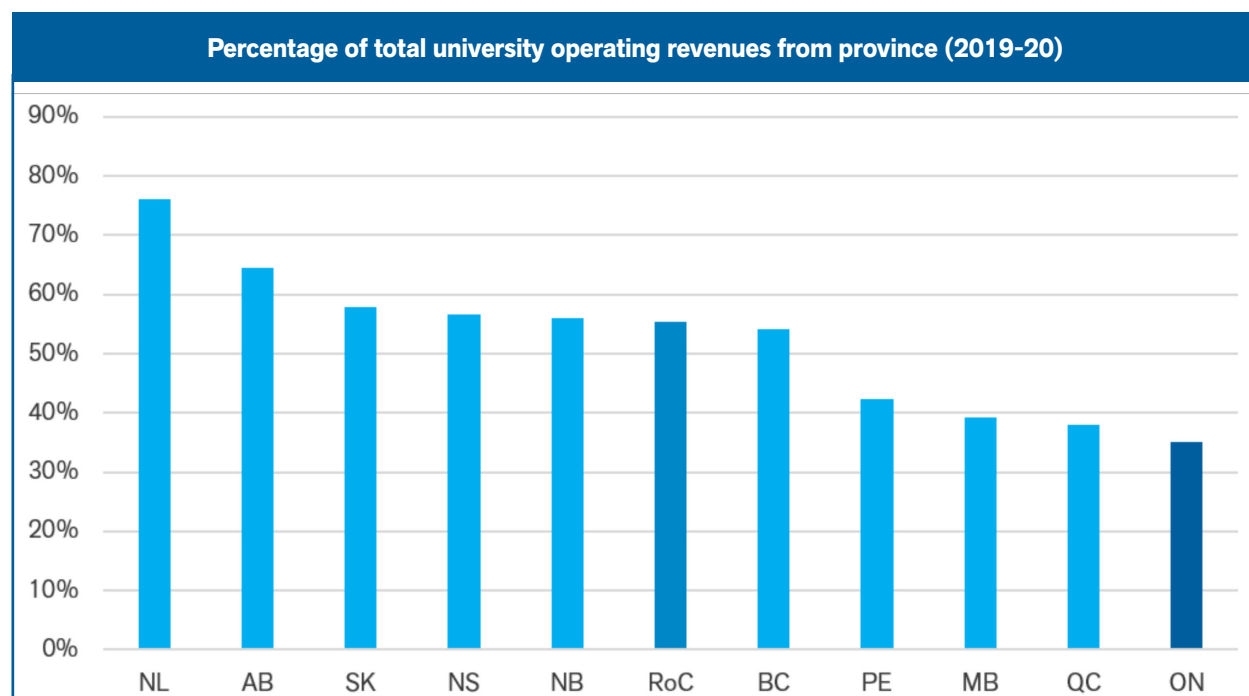
The decline of per-student funding in Ontario has put increasing pressure on institutions to raise tuition fees in order to fill the financial gap.

Ontario's undergraduate tuition fees have increased by 26 per cent since 2010, resulting in the province having one of the highest levels of tuition fees in the country (\$7,938 at the undergraduate and \$9,765 at the graduate levels in 2021-22). Undergraduate tuition fee levels in Ontario are an astounding 45 per cent higher than the average for the rest of Canada.

Ontario's undergraduate international tuition fees have increased by 121 per cent since 2010, resulting in the province also having the highest level of international tuition fees in the country (\$42,185 at the undergraduate and \$26,236 at the graduate levels in 2021-22). International undergraduate tuition fee levels in Ontario are an astonishing 61 per cent higher than the average for the rest of Canada.

As of 2016-17, tuition fees surpassed public funding as the single largest source of university revenue. Currently, 58 per cent of Ontario university operating income is provided through student fees. This figure was only 20 per cent in 1990, demonstrating the increasing reliance on user fees and the gutting of the public funds provided to universities over the past three decades.

Without recourse to higher tuition fees—which is proven to be a flawed policy and damaging to the accessibility of Ontario universities and the quality of student experience—universities will need new public investment to protect educational accessibility and quality.



Cuts to student assistance

In 2019, the Ontario government cut over \$671 million from the student assistance budget and changed eligibility criteria for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The OSAP cuts and changes to eligibility criteria for financial assistance meant that it became harder for many students to access postsecondary education, especially those from low and middle income backgrounds.

Students are reporting being burdened with less access to financial assistance, costlier loans, and higher amounts of debt. These changes are, by definition, regressive because those most adversely affected are those already forced to borrow for their education.

These changes to student assistance will make postsecondary education less accessible for students in Ontario and negatively impact diversity and innovation at our universities.

A multi-pronged approach

OCUFA has long argued that tuition fees are a barrier to access that prevent students from pursuing a postsecondary education and should not be relied upon as a foundation for university funding. Thus, we strongly argue for the further regulation and reduction of university tuition fees, including international tuition fees, to close the increasing gap between what Ontario students pay for their education compared to students in other provinces. Students in Ontario are bearing the burden of the government's chronic underfunding of postsecondary education by having to pay astronomically high tuition fees for their education.

OCUFA strongly believes that university funding, tuition fees, and financial aid cannot be viewed in isolation from one another; rather, it is our position that that these three elements should be considered as part of a unified funding system. Doing otherwise will produce incomplete and contradictory policies. While we strongly advocate for the reduction of tuition fees in Ontario, any such reduction must be accompanied by a corresponding increase in government funding.

OCUFA supports the calls of students' unions and calls on the government to increase the student assistance budget and to provide grants not loans.