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University of Guelph Faculty Association Submission to the Rae Review of Post Secondary Education

The following document was prepared as a result of discussions held at UGFA Executive and Council and submitted on behalf of the UGFA. We encourage all our members to make their views known at the Rae Panel website, www.raereview.on.ca

The University of Guelph has made a submission to the Rae Panel that covers a broad range of issues affecting both this institution and post-secondary education as a whole. The Faculty Association of the University of Guelph generally supports our institutional recommendations, but is making this submission to highlight some issues we consider to be major concerns in enhancing post-secondary education in Ontario.

In making these comments, UGFA notes that faculty at Guelph have long been engaged in tackling issues of accessibility and the quality of the university experience for students, and continue in their conviction that maintaining a strong university system is critical not only for the economic well-being of Ontario, but also for the social and ethical strength of the province and country.

1. Institutions and people under unhealthy stress: It is a matter of considerable concern that many performance indicators can be taken as suggesting that Ontario universities are doing outstanding jobs with lean, mean budgets, and that this is an efficient situation that should be continued. **Can we really accept the idea that the system is healthy or sustainable when faculty, staff, students and administrators - the people in the system - know that they and the resources of the university are stretched to the limit and hovering on a dangerous precipice?**

Teaching workloads have been increasing, and pressure continues to mount for faculty to intensify research and scholarly productivity. Like students cramming for finals or getting that thesis finished, faculty have been coming up with heroic efforts – but that kind of adrenalin rush can't be sustained indefinitely as a healthy lifestyle. This picture of a system on-edge came up often, and not just for faculty. Support staff are being hard-pressed in departments, students are desperately juggling too many hours at jobs with study time, physical resources people try to patch-up aging structures, and the ribs of the “fat cat” of administration are far too evident. **The challenge to the Rae Panel – and the Government of Ontario – is to find the means of bringing an excellent system back to a healthy status to ensure its sustainability.**

2. Stable, adequate funding: A significant component of the prescription for system health needs to be **a new and updated long-term, viable funding formula that allows both institutions and students to make rationale long-term decisions.** Funding must be at *adequate* levels to ensure a high quality education for the students of Ontario. In addition, funding must show **consistency**, and the funding structure needs **transparency**. The funding

formula needs to include factors which influence the cost of university operations, such as inflation rate, cost of living, and depreciation of the physical plant.

(a) For facilities: A major source of the problems facing universities today can be attributed to a long-term under-funding of the system.

- **Deferred maintenance** of physical facilities is an immense special legacy of that chronic under-funding that presents significant risks to safety.
- **Underfunding of university library resources** is an infrastructure problem that threatens essential scholarly functions of the universities. Electronic and internet access to reference materials are splendid resources, but they can be costly to supply and maintain.

(b) For programs: The outdated funding formula prevents the proper decision-making in terms of hiring faculty and staff, restructuring academic programs, implementing new programs, and maintenance of university operations.

- Adequate base funding for universities is essential to protect the fundamental activities of universities from being usurped by the need to accommodate too closely the preferences of “**private partners**” who *may*, sometimes with stringent conditions, provide much needed funds in small or large amounts (e.g. radio tower rentals, and donations of new buildings).

(c) For students: Students entering a university program equally need a “**no surprises**” **fee structure** so that they can adequately plan and save.

- While once a student might encounter a single fee increase during a 4-year program, now annual increases are the norm. High tuition fees, combined with not-inconsiderable increases in living expenses, create a precarious situation for students (and, often, their parents).
- Holding down a demanding part-time – or even full-time- job during an academic term can rob students of the opportunity to focus full energy on their studies and the broader university experience. Relevant summer work experience may also have to be passed over for more lucrative jobs.
- Ursula Franklin refers to teaching and research as “**a form of stewardship for the future**”. The privilege of having a university education – not necessarily free, but accessible – has been a motivation for a student to recognize that they have societal obligations. (The commencement speech factor.) As one faculty member (*Carol Dauda*) has asked, what is the effect when “I have a moral obligation to society” becomes largely replaced by “I owe a huge student loan”?
- Obtaining funding through programs of grants, loans, scholarships, and work-study should not require that students already have advanced training in financial management and business planning. **Simplify, keeping in mind that the objective is to allow students access to higher education.**

3. Recognize the distinctive quality of universities, and their distinctive mission . Community colleges play an important role in many areas of post-secondary education, and there are certainly opportunities for interactions with university programs. But ultimately, the universities do have a specific and distinctive role.

- **Research and scholarship are fundamental to universities. Students have direct access to people with active research pursuits, and this contact is what distinguishes universities from community colleges.** It is university faculty that make this link to scholarly work for both undergraduate and graduate students, ensuring universities provide “education” rather than “training”. This distinction between universities and community colleges becomes blurred as universities are pressed to do more with less, and as faculty and staff have less time to reflect on the consequences and impact of current research, and less time to talk with students.

“Expansion of first-rate faculty ...has not kept pace with the expansion of enrollments and courses offered; professors lack the time and energy they could once devote to personal contact with students.” Jane Jacobs, 2004 Dark Age Ahead p. 49

- Similarly, university research topics are increasingly restricted by the need to be “practical” and access external, targeted funding sources. Yet lasers, restriction endonucleases, transposable genetic elements, group theory are now fundamental aspects of high technology industries that come from discovery-driven scholarship.

“...industry turns to the universities because they represent an independent and therefore credible source of expertise. It should be seen to be vital, therefore, to industry that they do nothing to compromise that independence. This sets a limit to the extent to which industry should determine what research is done – and what research is not done.” John C. Polanyi, in an address to NSERC

4. Accessibility: Student tuition fees and living costs are a substantial barrier to accessibility. They not only affect who can enter university from high schools, but can provide a substantial barrier to returning to education from the workplace or home.

- Student fees could be held to a reasonable and an appropriate level if the provincial government met its obligation to fund the post-secondary system to at least the national average. Any discussion on ways to increase student debt load or to base repayment of student loans on income after graduation shifts the emphasis of the discussion away from the government on to the students. The constant increase in fees can only lead to less accessibility.
- **Good quality post-secondary education attracts people who will stay around after completing their programs, to be a pool of skilled workers and entrepreneurs.** Ontario needs to at least match the national average in funding if it hopes to compete for that pool. It has been suggested that the “Boomers” are more interested in health care than education, but educated people are needed to deliver that health care – and many other needs.
- **There is a tension between quality and accessibility,** that also needs to be recognized when talking about increased participation, as the needs of different people and at different stages of life for university and other post-secondary education will vary. **Post-secondary education isn’t a production line,** automatically feeding-in from high-school and pushing a product out to the workplace. The system is strengthened by the opportunity of **multiple entry points** and the **diversity in the experience levels** of students in the programs.

5. Universities are Communities: There needs to be a clear recognition of the unique role universities play in society, as communities where knowledge is not only generated, but also evaluated and imparted. One of the strengths of the Ontario university system is the diversity of its institutions.

*“From all this emerged the concept of **Knowledge as a common good** and the modern understanding of universities as **major national resources**, resources that include not only physical facilities, such as laboratories, libraries and hospitals, but also staff with valuable expertise and skills.” Ursula Franklin, 2000, in *The Corporate Campus*, p. 18*

- Universities are not just generating exploitable ideas for industry, or training people for the workforce. They are part of society as a whole, and as society needs to be concerned with more than work and profit, so the universities need to be communities with a broader, more balanced mission.
- Universities as communities also means that different universities will have different “personalities”, will have different priorities, members and missions. The diversity of Ontario’s multiple institutions is a strength, and **university autonomy in local decision-making and direction** is critical to maintaining that diversity.
- Faculty, students and alumni already play a significant role in the governance of their universities. To increase their effectiveness, they need more access to information about the resources available and the costs encountered.

6. Program design and delivery: Universities need to be able to develop specializations in a fluid, responsive manner. Defining “specialty schools” too rigidly runs the risk of locking institutions into the present (or, rather, the immediate past). Change is permanent.

- **Faculty have professional expertise** that needs to be used in development and review of program structures and in establishing educational values and standards.
- **Investment in faculty is essential to ensure programs develop and change effectively.** Faculty who are desperately pressed for time to manage their class-room teaching, grading, student-advising and administrative roles, let alone deal with a highly-competitive research environment, are able to find little time to reflect on current courses and programs and develop new ones. **Contractual faculty** and “roads scholars” need greater job security so that making a commitment to program development at an institution isn’t something done at cost to their own best interests. We also need to **educate more doctoral students** who can become tomorrow’s professors, and thus more funding is needed to increase the number of graduate students.

*“Those of us who consider teaching and research a form of stewardship for the future, find that the essential academic decision-making is taken out of our hands. What we are to teach and how to teach it appears no longer a subject of academic and social discourse, but has become a “market decision”. What then can we do if we want to retain Canadian universities and colleges as institutions serving the public interest?” Ursula Franklin, 2000, in *The Corporate Campus*, p. 20*

- There are opportunities for students in one institution to make use of courses and expertise from another, whether through distance-education or transfer credits. However, there are also disincentives and barriers for “life-long learners” who want to take a single university course. Even web-based courses pose substantial financial barriers to prospective students. The challenge of transferring credits is to make it feasible and less complex, while avoiding an entirely unstructured “cafeteria” system.
- Unfortunately, the mandate for “innovative” delivery of programs has been flawed from the start, as the real emphasis has been on doing more with less. If a university course is delivered more cheaply at a college – but with a different text and different treatment – is it the same course? Web-based distance education is a delivers information, tests and assignments efficiently, but when designed and managed so that students have considerable interaction with instructors, and have the opportunity to practise written communication skills, then it just isn’t cheap.

7. Quality: Quality needs to be recognized and rewarded – for students, faculty, and whole institutions. But we need to know what we really mean by “quality”, and determine that our measures are appropriate. What are the real, long-term outcomes of “quality”? The primary driving force of quality indicators should not be “efficiency”, as in cost-saving.

- **Universities have taken a lead on outcome-based quality measurements, and considerable time is spent within the institution and beyond on regular assessments of faculty as well as students and programs.** These may be in the form of biennial reviews of faculty performance, regular course evaluations and assessments each semester, external appraisals of programs, and peer-reviews of publications and research funding applications. These applications of quality-assessments are already extensively used and supported by universities.

“In the meantime, rejoicing that university education has become a growth industry, administrators and legislators seek increasingly to control problems of scale by applying lessons from profit –making enterprises that turn expanded markets to advantage by cutting costs. Increased output of product can be measured more easily as numbers of credentialed graduates than as numbers of educated graduates. Quantity trumps quality.” Jane Jacobs, 2004, p 49 in “Dark Age Ahead”

- Performance indicators show that university graduates do well after graduation. There is little variation among universities in this area. Collecting data for the sake of collecting data is expensive and basically useless. **If performance indicators are to be provided then they should be shown to be reliable and useful first.**
- **“Training teachers” for universities risks creating another version of a teachers’ college and sacrificing the concept of “professor” to create a course-delivery specialist.** Teaching skills are certainly important, and can be enhanced through activities of outstanding Teaching Support Services units on campuses. One good “quality” measurement for teaching might well be how these units (and the faculty who work with them to improve their teaching skills) are valued on the campus. The mandate and responsibilities of external review and evaluation bodies must be clearly established, in broad consultation with the universities and other stakeholders **before they are established.**

8. What would “more money” do? It is not hard to ask for more resources, yet it is worth recognizing what such added resources would do for Ontario universities – and for the University of Guelph in particular. Faculty Association members were asked to identify positive effects that more funds would have in their unit or area, and their suggestions included the following:

- hire more professors to restore student/ faculty ratios
- improve scientific equipment in teaching labs
- increase the laboratory experience that students get
- reduce the size of undergraduate classes
- increase the number of small group seminars to encourage critical thinking and creative problem solving
- increase access and support for instructional technology, student response systems
- refurbish and improve classrooms (appropriate technology, moveable chairs and tables, effective sight-lines, lighting)
- support curriculum design and innovation
- support research on the impact of learning and teaching, curriculum innovations
- introduce a required course on learning and teaching theory and practice for all Ph.D students
- launch a certificate program for faculty interested in exploring learning and teaching theory and practice.
- hire more teaching and support staff; reduce teaching loads
- upgrade teaching lab and pilot plant equipment
- hire more teaching assistants and train them better
- hire more technical assistance for teaching labs, and more and better assistance for computer and web-based training
- improve computing facilities
- provide minimal bench fees to encourage faculty (and others) to create research opportunities for senior undergraduates
- update undergraduate laboratory equipment
- faculty complement increase, to allow time for development of new courses

9. And as a final word on planning

“A common denominator of technological planning has always been the wish to adjust parameters to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Underlying the plans has been a production model, and production is typically planned to maximize gain. In such a milieu it is easy to forget that not everything is plannable.” **Ursula Franklin, 1999, The Real World of Technology, rev.ed. pp. 79-80.**