

OPSEU Commentary

On

ONTARIO - A LEADER IN LEARNING Report & Recommendations

By

The Honourable Bob Rae
Advisor to the Premier and the Ministry
of Training, Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Bob Rae recently released his Report and Recommendations to the Ontario government, entitled “Ontario – A Leader in Learning”. In it he highlighted the importance of post-secondary education to individual growth as well as to society as a whole. We support the core principles outlined in the Report and would like to take the opportunity to comment on a number of issues addressed in the report about which we feel most strongly.

OPSEU members who work in the education sector (academic and support staff in all 24 community colleges and support staff in several universities) number approximately 16,000 and our message has consistently been clear – we are committed to maintaining and enhancing the quality of higher education in Ontario. In many ways, despite some shortcomings, the Rae Report has confirmed our commitment to funding, quality, accountability and accessibility.

The five main suggestions we will be taking to the Ontario government are as follows:

1. Funding is Needed Immediately for Quality Postsecondary Education

For the first time in many years, we are hopeful that post-secondary education will be funded to the level necessary to achieve the quality Ontarians deserve. Our desire is that this government commits the funding necessary to bring us up to the level of peer North American jurisdictions. Bob Rae estimates that \$2.2 billion is needed but does not talk about direct government funding beyond the \$1.5 billion amount. A study conducted by Hugh Mackenzie estimated that to achieve this level, combined college and university funding would need to increase by \$1.8 billion in 2004 – 05.¹ This should be our goal as a province.

2. Part-time workers must have rights.

Part-time employees in the college system need to have the right to bargain collectively if we are to reach our goal of quality of education.

3. System Design is Important.

We support some of the recommendations around the mission and design for post-secondary education in Ontario, including a new legislative framework, the unique mission of francophone institutions, a reaffirmed mandate for our colleges and the place of Apprenticeship as a post-secondary program. Regarding Apprenticeship, however, we do not support the transfer of program responsibilities from the provincial government to the colleges. We want a full discussion between Labour and the Ontario government regarding apprenticeship before any structural changes are made.

¹ Ibid, p. 4 - 5

4. Accountability is crucial.

We want a more accountable process for the entire system, especially the Council on Higher Education which must include OPSEU and labour representatives.

5. Accessibility is key.

In order to create a system which is open to every qualified student who wishes to participate, all equity groups must have the same opportunity as the dominant group in Ontario to enjoy the benefits of higher education. We are pleased to see special assistance proposed for aboriginal participation, people with disabilities and the francophone community and a commitment to participation targets for students from underrepresented groups. The “First Generation” strategy is also an extremely worthwhile goal – paying attention to the student who is first in the family to participate in postsecondary education. Our commitment to accessibility means that we also believe that tuition should be regulated and standardized. Tuition should not be allowed to go up and individual institutions should not be allowed to determine their own fee structures. The Ontario NDP calls for fees to be cut by 10%, not just a freeze.

1. Funding for Quality

We want to reach our goal of quality education and to bring us up to the peer North American Standard by 2007/08. Bob Rae has determined that in order to do this, we would need an investment of \$2.2 billion into post-secondary education. Investment in infrastructure is badly needed too – more than \$300 million in deferred maintenance at the colleges by next year.² The Mackenzie study indicates we will need a greater commitment – up to \$1.8 billion in 2004 – 05.

Rae’s message is clear to the college and university communities:

“I want to be very clear here about what the new funding is for. It is not to disappear into the administrative function of institutions. It is not a one-time infusion to make up for previous cutbacks.”³

In our briefs and presentations to the Rae Review, OPSEU consistently called for the restoration of the levels of staffing required to restore quality education, the restoration of hours of instruction, remedial education services, funds to libraries

² Ibid, p. 5

³ “Ontario – A Leader in Learning”, Report and Recommendations by the Honourable Bob Rae, February 2005

for collections and adequate staffing levels, the restoration of student:counsellor ratios, and levels of staffing for front-line student services.

We are therefore encouraged by the Report's recognition of the focus on the "learning and hiring of faculty and the development of teaching excellence in Ontario's institutions of higher education" and we agree that,

*"the hiring of additional faculty will be one of the measurable quality improvements sought as additional revenues are provided to institutions beginning in 2005-2006."*⁴

Although the importance of support staff is implicit in this statement, we believe it is necessary to explicitly identify the importance of support staff to the enhancement of quality education in Ontario colleges and universities. Implicit too is the recognition that the increased use of part-time employees – both support and academic – cannot guarantee quality education. We want to see the recognition of front-line services and faculty:student ratios that keep up with anticipated student expansion.

The "results" of focusing on "Academic Renewal" are results we look forward to as well – improved levels and types of contact for students with faculty and other teaching staff, greater student satisfaction with the quality of teaching, greater access to learning and research resources as well as a workload formula that allows teachers to provide quality education.

Quality

Professor Jerry White of the University of Western Ontario has carried out a study among college faculty regarding quality. He stated that,

*"...the measurement of quality [of education] has been recognized as a very complex issue ... To measure quality requires the use of impressions, understandings and observations of those who deliver the programs."*⁵

We are pleased that the Report identified the need for "both quantitative and qualitative indicators of quality". In addition, there is recognition that some of the current measures in place to determine "quality" from the students' perspective are flawed – including the college student satisfaction survey which is part of the data collected under the Ontario key performance indicators.

⁴ Ibid, p. 53

⁵ "Voices From the Classroom: The Ontario Colleges and the Question of Quality", Jerry White, *Centre for Research on Work and Society*, Working Paper Series – No. 22, York University, Toronto, Canada

The Report confirms that quality assurance depends on improvements in the area of student services and that means recognition of the important role of support staff in providing those services.

The dedication of \$40 million in each of the next three years to colleges for instructional equipment purchases for apprenticeship, diploma and applied degree programs is a positive step forward. In addition, the Report recommends that the government provide sufficient funding to “permit colleges and universities to contract up to \$200 million of repair work in each of the next three years, beginning in 2005-2006” and “up to \$300 million in capital construction in each of the next ten years.” For the repair work and capital construction, “partner donations” are “to be encouraged and given priority, but should not be made mandatory”.⁶ “Partner donations” is just another term for P3s (Public-Private Partnerships) and we do not agree with P3s. The P3 arrangements for SuperBuild were made mandatory under the previous government and turned out to be a disaster in many instances.

Academic Renewal

A focus on “learning and the hiring of faculty and the development of teaching excellence in Ontario’s institutions of higher education” is crucial. For us, this means new hires, elimination of the exploitation of part-time faculty and renewed commitment to professional development.

We are very pleased that the report recognizes that,

*“The degree of meaningful contact with faculty, the quality of teaching, mentoring and academic counselling, and the attention to unique learning needs, are all key factors that contribute to student satisfaction and success”.*⁷

We agree there is a need to address the reality of Ontario lagging behind other jurisdictions in overall student - faculty ratio. Our position has consistently been that student - faculty ratio is an important measure of quality.

Regarding the supply of “teaching resources”, the Report refers to the foundation on which to build this teaching excellence:

*“...a combination of full and part-time faculty, librarians, teaching assistants and technologists, and other staff who dedicate time to teaching functions”.*⁸

⁶ Bob Rae, “Ontario – A Leader in Learning”, p. 89

⁷ Ibid, p.54

⁸ Ibid, p. 54

Quality, in our view, is undermined by the continuation of the ratio of part-time to full-time faculty and by the inability of part-time employees to participate in the collective bargaining process. The turnover of part-time workers affects quality and so too does the lack of continuity and the lack of knowledge of the system that accompanies the overuse of a part-time workforce. Part-time workers have no voice and no rights and this has a negative effect on quality.

We also strongly agree that student services play a major role in the determination of quality of student experience. OPSEU support staff members are key to the delivery of high quality student services and therefore any enhancement of the quality of student services must take into account the need for appropriate staffing levels.

Support Services Renewal

Just as we need faculty renewal, we also need support staff renewal. There is virtually no reference made to the crucial role played by support staff in the system, nor any mention of the desperate need for more full-time support staff in the post-secondary education system.

The stresses on full-time support staff and the exploitation of part-time support staff has to be highlighted as well. Without this recognition, there is no use talking about "better service". Effective planning is needed to maintain a highly experienced, qualified support staff contingent.

In addition to support staff, there are a number of non-teaching academic roles that must be supported to meet the goal of better service. Such positions are Counsellors, Learning Strategists, professional Librarians and Disability Advisors.

There should be additional funding set aside to deal with all of the above staffing issues.

2. The exclusion of part-time college employees

What do family farm workers, the RCMP and part-time college workers have in common? They are all excluded from the collective bargaining process. Even agricultural workers on larger farms now have limited rights to collective bargaining in Ontario.

There can be no discussion of quality unless we discuss the fragmentation of work in the college system today and this exclusion of part-time employees from the collective bargaining process. Part time employees in Ontario colleges are excluded from collective bargaining under the *Colleges Collective Bargaining Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. C.15 ("CCBA")*. This is unproductive, unjust and antiquated. Part-timers should have full collective bargaining rights.

Under the CCBA, only “employees” can participate in collective bargaining. (See the statutory references set out below.) “Employees” are those persons that are in two statutorily prescribed units.

The academic unit excludes teachers who teach for six hours or less per week, counsellors and librarians employed on a part-time basis, teachers, counsellors or librarians who are appointed for one or more sessions and who are employed for not more than twelve months in any twenty-four month period.

The support staff unit excludes persons regularly employed for not more than twenty-four hours a week.

As a result, part-time employees do not have the right to participate in collective bargaining under the CCBA. In addition, those employees cannot unionize under the *Labour Relations Act* as that Act does not apply to community colleges (*LRA*, s. 4(1)(b)). Part-time custodial staff, part-time clerical staff, part-time technologists, part-time teachers and sessional teachers (some teaching up to 20 hours a week) – these are some of the thousands of part-timers working for lower wages and lesser dignity.

The Rae Report proposes new legislation to frame the vision for higher education in Ontario. Part of that vision and the subsequent legislation must include the recognition of part-time college employees, currently excluded as “employees”.

There has been almost a conspiracy of silence surrounding this huge group of workers who have been denied their basic right to organize and engage in the collective bargaining process.

3. System Design

A New Legislative Framework

We think there is some merit in creating a comprehensive new Postsecondary Act, charged with legislating a mission for Ontario as a Leader of Learning. This legislation would, as suggested, lay out the parameters for multi-year funding, revenue and accountability, establish new structures like the Council on Higher Education, and include the design for student assistance, tuition setting, accountability and mandated public reporting of performance and results.

Differentiation and collaboration

Differentiation is only desirable if there is an accompanying seamless system among colleges and a seamless transition between colleges and universities. Students need to be able to transfer credits. Otherwise they are paying for their education twice and this compounds the debt problem.

We disagree with differentiation through the tuition framework, accountability arrangements and the design of the funding formula if it means deregulation of tuition, opening the doors to the encouragement of elite universities and colleges and boards of governors which are not accountable to the community .

Francophone education

We agree with the recognition of francophone institutions' unique mission in Ontario society and we support the establishment of an advisory committee to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. OPSEU must have representation on such a committee.

We support the infusion of more funding to enhance the role of francophone education and as well, the Ontario government should reinstate a properly funded, full service French College in Central and South-West Ontario.

College Mandate

We support the reaffirmation of colleges and their focus on occupational education and labour market needs.

We also support the Report's recommendation that colleges be allowed to continue to allow applied degrees and "institutional evolution" if this evolution is beneficial to the college community, students and the broader community.

There is a new role identified for the colleges to reach out to high school students, particularly the 50 per cent who currently do not continue on to post-secondary education. We support the idea of partnerships with the school boards and workers at the elementary and secondary levels as well as education workers in the university sector to ensure that this process works well for all participants.

This report recommends that colleges be mandated to lead the formation of K-16 Councils to be in place by 2006. At this time, the role of these councils is not completely clear and we look forward to being part of joint discussions on exactly how they will be structured and their central purpose.

Regarding high school credits, we support the recognition of high school credits and the role of colleges in this program.

Apprenticeship

We wholeheartedly support the recognition of Apprenticeship as a post-secondary program and the treatment of apprenticeship programming delivered by colleges as a core function.

We do not support the transfer of program responsibilities from the provincial government to the colleges. We want a full discussion between Labour and the Ontario government regarding apprenticeship - before any structural changes to the existing system take place. The role of OPSEU members in the MTCU and the colleges, the role of the Union training centres, and the delivery of in-school training – all of these need to be thoroughly examined before proceeding on the necessary enhancement of the Apprenticeship system.

Better Information

We support the idea of a web portal for domestic and international students and their families as a source of current information on our post-secondary education system in Ontario.

However, we do not have enough information on how this would be set up, who would be staffing such an initiative, etc. If we can be assured that the whole operation remains in the public domain and is staffed by college and university support staff, we would welcome the new web portal.

Graduate Education

We fully support the expansion of graduate education in our universities. The proposal is to double the number of graduate students in Ontario to approximately 60,000 over ten years. Only in this way can we cover the impending faculty shortage due to retirements and close the gap that exists between Ontario and other jurisdictions.

We want to ensure that the capacity and supports which have to be in place include a viable university support staff group to assist in this important expansion.

4. Accountability

In his introductory remarks, Bob Rae sends a new and refreshing message to administrators and policy makers regarding the need for greater accountability – another pillar of OPSEU’s presentation to the Rae Review. The Report speaks directly to the issue:

“When governments, colleges and universities make decisions or set policies, the wider world should be able to understand the reasoning behind the decisions and be satisfied that they are based on evidence and good judgment. That does not mean universal approval. It does mean openness and candour about the rationale for decisions.”⁹

This call for greater accountability in the public post-secondary education system is potentially a great step forward for college and university workers. We are pleased that there is support for freedom of information legislation and for academic freedom and we will continue to advocate for an academic senate model for colleges as well as universities.

A New Higher Education Council

We will support the establishment of this Council and that it report directly to the MTCU – but only if this Council is a truly representative body and we insist that OPSEU has proper representation on this Council.

As suggested, this body should advise the government on how to achieve the new mission for post-secondary education, set targets and measures for improvement, coordinate research and encourage best practices. It is encouraging to see the “renewed focus on the pre-eminence of teaching and teaching excellence at post-secondary institutions”.¹⁰

However, we reserve judgement on the goal of monitoring and reporting on performance and outcomes as we are not clear what that means for our faculty and support staff in every college. Ideally a collaborative approach would achieve the best results.

Multi-Year Plans

The Report suggests that the institutions prepare multi-year plans in order to receive the provincial funding commitments. All such plans must be publicly available and readily accessible.

We support the proposal for colleges and universities to report to a standing committee of the legislature that conducts frequent and regular performance reviews. This is an improvement over the current system of public reporting.

Should the Boards of Governors be retained, they would have to be fully representative of the community they serve. OPSEU favours a return to the requirement that there be a labour representative appointed by the Ontario Federation of Labour on every Board of Governors.

⁹ Ibid, p. 16

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 51

We would also recommend a Senate for academic accountability similar to the university senates. We hope to see the enhancement of the role of the Auditor General, recently given the power to audit crown corporations.

5. Accessibility

Accessibility means ensuring that all equity groups have the same opportunity as the dominant group in Ontario to enjoy the benefits of higher education.

Participation targets

OPSEU has a proud history of supporting equity initiatives and therefore we welcome any move towards greater participation in higher education, especially greater participation of students from under-represented groups. The Council on Higher Education should adopt specific strategies to increase participation and the institutions will have to adopt these as well. These strategies should address the concerns of African – Canadian students as well as all other communities of colour. Hiring practices too must ensure that staff reflects the communities they serve.

Aboriginal students

We are in complete agreement that there needs to be a comprehensive strategy to increase Aboriginal participation and completion rates in higher education. Funding for colleges and universities to enhance programming and support services specifically tailored to the needs of Aboriginal students is key.

There needs to be an immediate infusion of funds into the system for this initiative and an additional amount by 2007-08 to further expand the programming and supports.

We recommend OPSEU participation in an advisory committee to the MTCU on Aboriginal post-secondary education.

Students with disabilities

We support additional funds in each of the next three years to be added to the targeted \$17 million operating grant to support students with disabilities. The recently introduced *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2004* would require Ontario colleges and universities to implement identified measures to improve accessibility within a legislated time frame. We support this Act, but want to make sure it extends accommodations funding to include college employees. OPSEU has previously called for the acceleration of the timelines associated with the implementation of this Act.

We support the work of the recently announced MTCU Advisory Committee on Disability Issues and OPSEU has identified a representative to sit on this committee.

Tuition Regulation

We believe that tuition should be regulated and standardized.

“Greater tuition fee variation”, the Report says, “will promote institutional and programmatic differentiation, by accommodating the unique revenue needs associated with different approaches to program delivery, student services and quality enhancements”.¹¹

We are concerned that such statements will lead to uneven development across the system and perhaps the development of elitist “centres of excellence” in some areas.

We disagree with the following statement: *“A ceiling on all tuition fees across all institutions is a blunt and ultimately unsuccessful instrument to promote accessibility. Controlling up-front costs through grants for lower income students that eliminate or reduce fees, and better loans for middle-class students, is a better approach”.¹²*

Promote Saving

We do not favour the introduction of the Ontario Learning Bond. It would not encourage low-income parents to save for their children’s future education. There is a simple reason why Stats Canada reports that fewer than one-fifth of families with incomes of less than \$30,000 are saving for their children’s postsecondary education compared with approximately two-thirds of families with incomes over \$80,000. People with lower incomes cannot save for the future when they can barely get by today.

Up-front Grants

We support the introduction of provincial grants for low-income students to cover tuition and compulsory ancillary fees for the first four years of study to a level of \$6,000 per year. However, the definition of “low-income students” is restricted to those who come from families earning below \$22,616 per year. Families earning between \$22,615 and \$35,000 would only receive a partial grant. Grant systems limited to these income levels will never provide access to working class students and students from immigrant communities and communities of colour. The formula for the introduction of grants is unacceptable. The 50 per cent of

¹¹ Ibid, p. 102

¹² Ibid, p. 103

students who do not attend either university or college at present would still not be reached through such a program.

Enhanced Access to Loans

Increasing the total loan amount available to students so that they can cope better with living and education costs is an improvement over the current system. However, it does not solve the overall problem of students completing their postsecondary education with heavy debts.

At present, colleges and universities are charged for students defaulting on their loans; this is known as the default rate. This lowers the institution's funding level if it exceeds an acceptable default ratio. Colleges have higher default rates than universities. They have no say regarding who gets the loans and yet the college is responsible for them.

The suggestions regarding help with loans repayment may as the report suggests, make repayment easier, but the basic premise is the same – students end up with heavier debts to repay.

We are opposed to the recommendation that the Ontario government, the federal government and other provinces start moving towards an Income Contingent Loans Repayment (ICLR) scheme.

Conclusion

Much of what the Rae Report recommends will greatly improve the postsecondary education system in Ontario. New funding, a new mission and system design, accountability and accessibility are all key issues in need of immediate attention. Even more urgent is the need to raise awareness on the issue of part-time workers at community colleges across the province. Our members play an incredibly important role in Ontario's postsecondary education system. We call on this government to immediately take action on all of these fronts if we are to reach our mutual goal of high quality education that is accessible to all Ontarians.