



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

Strategic Mandate Agreements 2014-2017

Summary of observations

October 15, 2014

Three-year Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) between Ontario universities and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) have been released and made available on a provincial web-site entitled [Transforming Ontario's Postsecondary Education System](#). When the differentiation policy framework for SMAs was released last year, [OCUFA observed](#) that Ontario universities are already differentiated. OCUFA also identified two tensions within the framework: between quality and fiscal restraint, and between accessibility and reducing duplication.

As an opportunity for each institution to articulate what is distinctive about it, the SMAs are successful illustrations of how diverse and differentiated Ontario universities are. They belie the claim that Ontario universities are trying to be all things to all people.

At the same time, the SMAs are sufficiently general as to offer few indications whether they “reflect the values and character of the local academic community” – as OCUFA reminded should be the case in its original analysis of the policy framework. The SMAs also offer no details about the implementation of institutions’ visions, and thus no clues whether they will be consistent with the principles of academic governance and respect for the rights of faculty and academic librarians reiterated in OCUFA’s Policy Statement on University Differentiation.

Only faculty associations can assess whether the SMA for their institution and the proposal “used to inform” it tend towards the goals of quality and accessibility or program simplification and economies of scale.¹ What they mean collectively and where they might be headed at this point can only be characterized in the form of broad generalizations.

The first set of observations address the instruments the government has at its disposal to nudge universities in the directions the government wishes to encourage. The preamble to each SMA includes an MTCU acknowledgement of each “University’s autonomy with respect to its academic and internal resource allocation decisions.” The government will not be intervening directly to “reduce unnecessary duplication,” but it has identified a variety of priorities, some of which are also signaled by the “system-

¹ SMA preambles advise that the proposals are notionally appended to the SMA. We have been advised by Ministry personnel that the proposals referred to are the SMA submissions that were due March 2014. The MTCU web-site provides links to some, but not all. Other submissions are available on university web-sites. Between the two sources, only two-thirds of the submissions are available.

wide” metrics for each of the six components of differentiation identified in the policy framework and reiterated in the SMAs. These include the expansion of online and experiential teaching and learning, and program collaboration between universities and colleges. In support of differentiation, the policy framework also identified financial sustainability and strategic enrolment as “key directions.”

The second set of observations focuses on what may be discerned about the initiatives university administrators are proposing to undertake in that environment. These include a summary of the types of programs universities are identifying for expansion and/or creation, and comments about their strategies for institution-specific metrics for the components of differentiation. Additional comments in the SMAs and letters of intent for capital funding under the Major Capacity Expansion Policy Framework may shed more light. Assessments about the implications of these proposed directions are best left to faculty associations.

Financial sustainability: No more details on metrics for financial sustainability or possible changes to the funding formula are provided than were in the policy framework. It is possible however to comment on the financial constraints based on enrolment projections in the SMAs and the funding forecast provided at the time of Ontario Budget 2014.

Equivalent enrolment figures for 2013-14 are not provided, but over the three years from 2014-15 to 2016-17, “baseline” projections for eligible full-time undergraduate students indicate enrolment is set to increase by three per cent; the number of spaces for eligible graduate students will increase by six per cent. Total eligible enrolment will increase by three per cent, but because the average number of Basic Income Units (BIU) per full-time student is higher for graduate students, the number of eligible BIUs will increase by three and a half per cent.

Over the same period, MTCU operating grants will rise by just one per cent. Once inflation is taken into account (as forecast in Ontario Budget 2014), funding per BIU will fall almost 6 per cent in that short period. This estimate does not include additional enrolment that is anticipated if provincial program approvals or provincial capital funding for expansion or new campuses are forthcoming.² Whether more students eligible for funding will be included, thus reducing the effective rate of funding per BIU even further, depends on the follow-through on strategic enrolment and program approvals.

Strategic enrolment: The differentiation policy framework describes strategic enrolment as “managing enrolment growth” to “help to align institutions’ enrolment planning with provincial priorities.” In the SMAs, undergraduate and graduate enrolments are treated separately and differently.

² The SMA submissions due March 2014 were expected to include baseline forecasts based on existing programs, plus enrolment projections that included enrolment above the baseline if approvals for proposed programs or funding for capital projects were provided by MTCU. Of the submissions available through the MTCU or university, only half provide the two versions of enrolment forecasts.

Some mechanism for allocating eligible graduate enrolment growth between institutions has been in place for over a decade. Allocations for the next three years include adjustments to the previous targets, including reductions for some institutions. Support for graduate allocations will be based on two envelopes – “general allocation” and “priorities.” General allocations are “metrics-based,” and the priorities envelope is based on “Ministry and institutional priorities” and “approved spaces for niche programs.” SMAs identify which of an institution’s programs are being supported in this envelope.³ Priority allocations will account for eight and a half per cent of growth in spaces for eligible graduate students.

Almost without exception, the SMAs make the neutral statement that projections for eligible undergraduate enrolment are “reasonable and in line with Ministry expectations...”⁴ In as much as strategic planning may be applied to undergraduate enrolments, there is no evidence from the SMAs that it will take any other form than MTCU approval for program funding.

Program strengths and growth areas: Each of the SMAs indicates the program areas the institution regards as its strengths, and identifies areas in which it proposes to grow. For its part, the MTCU is noncommittal about supporting program creation or institutional aspirations. Fifteen times it “notes” the number of proposals for engineering programs, however, and three times expresses concern about the expansion of education programs.

No changes to the ministry’s program approval requirements and process have been announced. It is not clear from the SMAs that institutions’ identification of their strategic priorities for program development amounts to anything other than advance warning of their intentions to submit program proposals (for MTCU funding). Except for proposals already submitted as of fall 2013 and put in limbo until the SMA process was completed, the SMAs also provide no indication of a change in the timing of approvals. It also is not clear, however, whether the MTCU will pick and choose from the menu of proposed programs, or treat them as competitive bids, instead of assessing each proposal on its merits. Except for the reservations expressed about program aspirations in engineering and education, the SMAs offer no clues about what the ministry regards as program priorities as these might be defined by fields of study.

Differences in nomenclature make it impossible to provide a precise picture of where senior university administrators set their program priorities. In general terms, of the 87 programs identified for approval and/or expansion, seventeen are in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas; another 17 are in health and 14 are in business. Another ten are in areas of design arts and technology characteristic of the “creative” economy. Of the remaining third, 12 are in areas related to social welfare

³ The exception is the University of Toronto, which receives support for general expansion of graduate studies.

⁴ The SMA with Laurentian University takes note of a change in definition adopted by Laurentian’s Senate, observing only that MTCU would continue to use its own definitions for counting and funding enrolment, and for monitoring compliance with tuition policy. The SMA with OCAD University notes that growth has been “signed off” under existing program approval processes.

and sustainability, six are geared to policy, four are focused on education, another four are in traditional arts fields, and three are best described as “other.”

Metrics: All SMAs feature a common set of metrics to establish the baseline and measure the progress of each institution on each of the six “components” of differentiation (Jobs, Innovation, and Economic Development; Teaching and Learning; Student Population; Research and Graduate Education; Program Offerings; Institutional Collaboration to Support Student Mobility). Institutions were invited to identify additional, institution-specific metrics. The uniqueness of institution-specific metrics limits the type and scope of possible generalizations, but there are a few observations.

First, two metrics for program offerings that were identified in the differentiation policy framework – institutional concentration of enrolment by program and credential, and institutional share of province-wide enrolment by program and credential – were not included as shared metrics in the SMAs.

Second, four of the universities offered no institution-specific metrics at all; it is impossible to know why. Only four added metrics for all six components. If each institution is to play to its strengths and shine a light on aspects of components that serve to differentiate it from other institutions, it is to be expected that they will be selective about the components for which it will offer additional metrics.

Third, there were two patterns of note with respect to the number of metrics proposed for components of differentiation. Program Offerings drew the least attention. Excluding proposed metrics that may be regarded as variations on the common metrics, by far the most “popular” component was Jobs, Innovation, and Economic Development. Two metrics proposed in the draft version of the policy framework but dropped in the final version were revived as institution-specific metrics. These are: “Entrepreneurial related metrics (e.g. number of start-up ventures, success of incubators, commercialization of research)” and the “Number of partnerships with other sectors including: health, education, and private sector.” Other metrics added are oriented to labour market considerations.

Fourth, the flipside to interest shown in a particular component of differentiation (as evidenced by the number of independent metrics proposed) is the number of proposed variants of the system-wide metrics. By sheer numbers, Research and Graduate Education generated the most metrics that were variants of this sort, although more system-wide metrics were proposed for this component than any other. By volume of variants and the proportion of these variants to the system-wide metrics, Teaching and Learning figures most prominently. Student Population and Institutional Collaboration follow.

The metrics proposed to assess research performance are familiar, and OCUFA and member associations have already expressed reservations about their type and proliferation. The OCUFA Policy Statement on University Differentiation in Ontario reiterates OCUFA’s position that collaborative programs and programs incorporating online forms of teaching and learning be subject to established procedures and practices for academic oversight, and consistent with the rights and responsibilities of faculty and academic librarians. These apply plainly enough to online and experiential learning and institutional

collaboration at the general level at which these are endorsed in the form of metrics; additional comments identify other initiatives that may be indicative of institutions' strategies.

Additional comments: Many of the additional comments in SMAs simply indicate specific initiatives being undertaken or proposed by an institution. Added comments include the MTCU "notes" about program expansion in education and engineering, and MTCU exhortations to some institutions to pursue institutional collaboration more diligently.

Yet other additional comments allude to the possible adoption of programs and practices that are not necessarily part of the framing of differentiation in the policy framework, but have been named as ways of transforming higher education. The most common are references to "learning outcomes" or some variation. Examples of others are "new curriculum delivery models" and "high impact practices." New degrees or credentials – three year degrees, two-and-two college-university degrees, and "laddering" of graduate credentials, for example – also feature in the additional comments.

Capital expansion: Most proposals for capital funding under the Major Expansion program are geared towards program expansion. They are notable for the number of joint programs between universities and colleges, including dual credential and integrated degree programs, and the expansion of applied degrees. In as much as initiatives that figure as innovations in Teaching and Learning, outcomes-focused programming, and "innovative pedagogy" are also identified.

Concluding comments: The SMAs offer little or no grounds for alarm, in themselves. If the government will not be taking a hand in dictating the form and content of differentiation, the biggest concern may be the initiatives university administrations pursue simply to cope with the financial constraints imposed by the provincial government. In this regard, it is business as usual for faculty associations. Whether a university administration claims this or that initiative falls under the rubric of differentiation and mandated by its SMA, it will still be necessary for each faculty association to be vigilant about maintaining the integrity of academic governance, faculty and academic librarian rights under collective agreements and memoranda of agreement, and the quality of academic life.