

Pandemic has caused decline in education quality according to new poll of university students and faculty

By Mark Pavilons

Pandemic stress has not only affected businesses and individuals, but post-secondary students are suffering, too.

University students, faculty, and academic librarians are struggling with social isolation, stress, and a lack of institutional support, according to the results of a new poll. It also finds that those working and studying at Ontario's universities believe the shift to online education has negatively impacted quality.

Without immediate action from universities and the Ontario government to address these concerns, it is likely that quality will degrade even further.

"These results demonstrate that meaningful engagement between students and faculty is fundamental to the learning process," said Rahul Sapra, president of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. "As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the scramble to move courses online, we have lost that human connection and educational quality has suffered."

The poll of 2,700 Ontario students, faculty, and academic librarians was commissioned by OCUFA and conducted by Navigator Inc. It reveals that 62 per cent of students and 76 per cent of faculty and academic librarians believe that the adjustments universities made to move teaching online have had a negative impact on education quality.

Financial security, care demands, and work-life balance are significant stress points for both groups. A third of students and two thirds of faculty and academic librarians revealed that they have care-giving responsibilities that they are struggling to balance while working or studying.

When asked about the impacts of the pandemic, a majority of students said they are concerned about their education quality and academic performance, their financial security as a result of high tuition fees and fewer opportunities to earn income, their mental health, and their ability to manage non-academic responsibilities, including caregiving, while studying.

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, students have raised concerns about the quality and affordability of their education," said Kayla Weiler, Ontario Representative of the Canadian Federation of Students. "These results further indicate that universities and the Ontario government must take action to improve learning and working conditions."

Faculty and academic librarians, who have been working harder than ever during the past eight months to deliver the best education possible online, feel they are still falling short of their own expectations.

With many universities making unilateral decisions about course delivery, a majority of faculty and academic librarians said they are concerned about their ability to teach and support students, their professional development, their mental health, and their ability to manage non-academic responsibilities, including caregiving, while working.

Financial security, mental health, and the challenges of balancing work and care responsibilities are of significantly higher concern to contract faculty. Most of these faculty work contract-to-contract with little job security, while receiving much lower pay than their securely-employed colleagues.

"Since this pandemic began, we have been hearing heart-wrenching stories from contract faculty across Ontario," said Kimberly Ellis-Hale, a contract faculty member at Wilfrid Laurier University. "As dedicated instructors, we are committed to providing our students with exceptional educational experiences, but the reality is that, because we are contract faculty, we are not getting paid for the enormous amount of work it has taken to put these courses online and deliver them remotely, or to provide the additional support

our students need and deserve. All this extra work and overtime is taking a heavy toll.?

The results of the poll also make it very clear that, even once the pandemic has ended, online education will not see the enthusiastic adoption that many have claimed. On the whole, neither students nor faculty view online learning as a desirable approach to a university education.

It is clear that most students, faculty, and academic librarians will not be returning to campus any time soon. However, there are still important actions Ontario's universities can take to address these concerns. Reducing class sizes by hiring additional, securely employed faculty will ensure students receive more one-on-one support and a better educational experience. Lowering tuition fees will help students struggling to make ends meet, now and after the pandemic.

Finally, investments in better resources for students, faculty, and academic librarians ??specially technology supports ??ould improve educational outcomes and address the mental and emotional burn-out many are feeling.

However, Ontario's universities will have difficulty making these changes without additional support from the provincial government, which made substantial cuts to postsecondary education funding prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ford government, critics say, has displayed a pattern of behaviour by consistently ignoring those working on the front lines of Ontario's public education system. It is not too late to change course.

?Throughout the pandemic, the Ford government has stood on the sidelines and watched as university students, faculty, and academic librarians struggle,? said Sapra. ?Even in the middle of the pandemic, the top concerns for students and faculty are fees and funding. It is time for the provincial government to step up, set an example, and invest in Ontario's underfunded universities so that they can improve the educational experience and help students and faculty succeed.?

Reversing cuts to education by investing in smaller classes, good jobs, and lower tuition fees will not just help Ontario's universities during the pandemic, but will lay the foundations for students, faculty, and academic librarians to effectively pivot back to the in-person educational experience they say is most effective.

Founded in 1964, OCUFA represents 17,000 professors and academic librarians in 30 faculty associations across Ontario. It is committed to enhancing the quality of higher education in Ontario and recognizing the outstanding contributions of its members towards creating a world-class university system.

For more information, visit the OCUFA website at www.ocufa.on.ca.