

COU Academic Colleagues Committee Report to the UOIT Academic Council

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Synopsis

This report overviews the key discussion items and topics discussed at the COU Academic Colleagues committee for the September 2019 meeting, which was a joint Academic Colleagues and Executive Council meeting.

Background

The objective of the COU Academic colleagues committee is to support the COU council, consisting of the executive heads of the institution members of the COU, with feedback from academic colleagues concerning COU initiatives. Every year the COU Academic colleagues committee, with the approval of council, focuses on particular topics of discussion. At the September 2019 meeting, the committee focused on “thought leadership” related to the future of postsecondary education: **“Given the priorities Ontario universities share, what critical issues should COU pursue as part of our proactive policy leadership?”**

Thought Leadership COU Colleagues Summary

Colleagues prepared for discussion with Executive Heads at Council Meeting by discussing “thought leadership” related to the future of postsecondary education: **“Given the priorities Ontario universities share, what critical issues should COU pursue as part of our proactive policy leadership?”** The goal was to provide the Executive Heads with the perspectives of the academic colleagues on the topic as they prepared for the Ontario Universities Summit held the following day. COU’s goal is to move from philosophical discussions of the future of the university to more tangible action plans for the next 5 to 10 years and to avoid simply reacting to government changes in direction.

Colleagues drew from their strategic plans to frame their thinking. They identified common university priorities in which universities could be thought leaders. These included: environmental sustainability, reconciliation and indigenization, student diversity, interdisciplinary studies, research, internationalization, and lifelong/third age learning. Colleagues also noted that universities are partners in addressing all of society’s needs, challenges and priorities.

Summary of the points covered at the meeting:

- Discussion of what “thought leadership” means;
- Discussion of universities’ strategic planning documents;
- Discussion of COU Thought Leadership draft themes (attached);
- Identification of recommended priorities.

Colleagues Committee Observations

Discussion of what “thought leadership” means:

- Thought leadership in the context of the discussion referred to imagining what Ontario universities will look like in 2030, and considering how are we going to get there and what do we want to see.
- Thought leadership involves not simply reacting, but leading the thinking and behavior. For example, in a business context, it is not building on past frameworks, but having new ways of framing problems and collectively thinking about what *could* be, how to add value, and trying to get ahead by *shaping* the conversation rather than just reacting to what government says and does.

Discussion of universities’ strategic planning documents:

- The strategic plans were of varied relevance compared to where people are at today due to variety of ages and lengths of the plans. Most references to support for the value of university were given in commercial terms. The role of government provides the context for strategic plans. There were comments that just because something is not in the plan does not mean it is not something that should be addressed or prioritized.

Discussion of COU Thought Leadership draft themes:

- Suggested thematic areas seemed to be reactionary rather than about real leadership. Gaps were identified: such as,
 - o Research is not very central in the document;
 - o issues of interdisciplinarity;
 - o not enough re: teaching;
 - o missing reconciliation;
 - o community is important in the strategic plans, but not mentioned here;
 - o climate change, sustainability are missing;
 - o education before university – inform the nature of elementary & high school;
 - o should respond based on what society needs;
 - o see more about management or managerialism in the themes (i.e., focus on students in terms of financial supports but nothing else), not leadership;
 - o nothing about diverse groups (i.e., they often outperform homogenous groups);
 - o need for a third column: what – more detailed: THEME, WHAT, HOW & WHY
- Discussion of WHY universities should be the leaders in society. “WHY” can be a transformative question allowing for a focus on collective well-being and relationships. In this sense, the university’s role is to facilitate conversations among and between different stakeholders. Therefore, we can strategically position ourselves because for health and well-being in a society to be realized, we train the necessary doctors and nurses, etc. There was a sense that rather than trying to compete with health care for scarce government funds, we share conclusion that health and well-being are important and that universities contribute to those public priorities. Without university-based research and training or facilitating, it would be difficult to build a strong healthcare system. Universities can be the hub to facilitate societal and collective well-being. We need our university leaders to be visionaries in collective well-being.

- We recognized the importance of management and the pragmatism needed to keep the university operating. For example, Laurentian University has engaged the Sudbury mining companies in thinking about sustainability and the environment as important to the bottom line. This was intended to support the idea that universities can and should provide the hub for making those connections, for facilitating the transformation of society through research and educating students to take on leadership roles that make those interdisciplinary connections. The idea of collective well-being was important here – what are we doing to make the world a better place in the long term?
- We should aim to create informed and engaged citizens. Training students for “a job” is a non-starter because we don’t control the jobs or economy of the future. We can prepare them to be resilient and flexible and to be able to apply skills in a variety of jobs.

Identification of recommended priorities:

- We were asked to identify one or two of the themes that resonated. Those were:
 - #1 The value of the University in today’s changing world, but we would replace “value” with “role” to reduce the idea of the university as a commodity.
 - #3 The future of post-secondary education
- The conclusion: the executive heads were encouraged to be courageous leaders who are visionary and future focused. Thought leaders work in crafting vision for the future and articulating what the university can be. How can universities reinvent themselves (e.g., similar to what libraries have done to reinvent themselves)?
- The next step is to think about how to implement forward thinking about the role of universities in advocating for ourselves and establishing universities as the hubs for or as the core of transformational social change.

Other COU Report Briefs

At all our meetings, we receive a number of COU report briefings. These reports are also distributed to executives at the university and some are posted at the COU web site. As such they do not have to be directly related to topics that the colleagues are discussing. Some points are listed below based on these COU report briefs.

Eva Busza provided updates on COU’s Affiliate Review and Strategic Management Agreements.

COU Affiliate Review

Preliminary findings from the Affiliate Review indicate:

- Members across all affiliates appreciate the value of communities of practice at COU. These allow individuals with similar job responsibilities to exchange ideas and share best practices.
- There was consensus across respondents about the need for Executive Heads to set priorities to guide the work of COU affiliates. The need for better communication across affiliates was also emphasized.
- The sector needs to find capacity to be more proactive, rather than reactive, in policy development. It should maintain a rapid response process to respond to changes in policy.
- COU members have difficulty setting collective priorities. This is partly due to differences in size, program mix, region, and communities served.

Update on Strategic Mandate Agreements 3 (SMA3)

The ministry has now laid out its engagement process going forward:

- October – early December: first bilateral discussions
- Dec 17, 2019 – institutional draft submission
- Jan 27-Feb 7, 2020 – second bilateral discussion
- Feb 18, 2020 – final draft submission
- March 30, 2020 – finalized document

Current sector priorities are: (1) the faculty workload reporting metric, (2) the skills and competencies metric, and (3) the innovation metric.

On September 30th, the sector submitted a document to MTCU recommending that the faculty workload reporting metric only include teaching activity of full-time faculty members, that data be aggregated at the institution level, and that the metric be reported on institutional websites to allow for institution-specific narrative and context. (COU also provided presentations and updates on the government's outcomes-based funding model to Academic Colleagues on May 16, 2019, and August 21, 2019.)