

President Rhonda Lenton's Remarks to Senate

November 23rd, 2023

Good afternoon. Bonjour. Boozhoo.

Colleagues, I want to start my remarks today by saying that I have always felt that it is a privilege to be able to work in higher education, supporting students in realizing their goals, and the well-being of the communities we serve.

We have built a strong foundation over the last number of years that has seen York rise in reputation and global rankings – increasing the full-time faculty complement and staff needed to support our students; advancing objectives and initiatives across all of the priorities in the University Academic Plan; strengthening programs; pedagogical innovation and research outcomes; advancing sustainability, equity and well-being initiatives; diversifying our global engagement and internationalization strategy; and, working across sectors to build strong partnerships.

At the same time, I also want to acknowledge that we continue to face some challenging circumstances partially connected to the aftermath of the pandemic but also other global issues including inequality, geopolitical tensions and international crises that are impacting us all.

These world events affect us directly but in addition they influence where higher education lands as a priority with governments and other sectors affecting our funding, our collaborations and partnerships.

My enthusiasm for higher education and my trust in York University to not only navigate these challenges but to help find the solutions are unwavering.

As a university, we will have different views, and in trying to identify the best path forward, we will need to rely on our collegial governance processes, and transparency.

In the next week, the budget consultations will begin. These consultations have been edited in direct response to the recommendations received largely by Faculty Councils about further details that colleagues would like to see.

We will also provide information as we receive it regarding the government's response to the Blue-Ribbon Panel, and once publicly released, the AGO Audit Report regarding York.

But for now, I would like to offer the following updates:

Middle East & Freedom of Speech

First, I want to respond to concerns that have been raised about the University's response to the situation in the Middle East and how it has been playing out on our campuses, and provide you with an update on the decision regarding the student associations.

Over the past month and a half, since the events in Israel and Gaza occurred, there have been many protests and rallies on our campuses. The majority of these have taken place peacefully and without disruption. This illustrates that the majority of students and others are committed to engaging in dialogue that is passionate but at the same time respectful and safe.

For all the students, staff, faculty, instructors who have contributed to these peaceful events, I want to thank you. I know this is a very distressing time for many.

I also want to especially thank the Division of Students and the Community Safety Department who have remained diligent in working with organizers and groups to uphold our commitment to freedom of expression while still ensuring the safety and well-being of community members, and that classes and research activities continue uninterrupted.

I want to address a statement that the University has received that was signed by faculty members, professors' emeriti and graduate students expressing concerns specifically regarding academic freedom, free speech and freedom of expression. I want to thank members for taking their time to share these concerns.

We take the matters raised in the statement seriously and want to affirm York University's resolute commitment to academic freedom – an important protection afforded to academics for their research or public statements made in the course of their scholarly work.

With respect to free speech and freedom of expression on our campuses, there are a few important pieces of information worth reviewing and which I hope answer the concerns that have been raised.

York affirms its responsibility to ensure that our various [collective agreements](#) are upheld as well as various policies and procedures such as:

- York's [Statement of Policy on Free Speech](#), as approved by Senate and the Board of Governors in 2018;
- the [Regulation Regarding Student Organizations](#), January 2023; and the
- [Student Code of Rights and Responsibilities](#)

We have also received positive feedback from many community members who have noticed the impact of moving toward a more proactive and collaborative approach to Community Safety.

We are continuing to meet with relevant student groups, and we have also begun to organize groups for faculty and staff who may want to get together to discuss what is happening on our campuses and/or for mutual support.

Regarding the University's response to the statement shared by the three student associations, we are following the process articulated in the Regulation.

After multiple attempts by the University to engage and work with the three student associations who published a statement that has caused concern and unease among the York University community, the University issued a Notice of Suspected Breach under the [Regulation Regarding Student Organizations](#). Consistent with [the Regulation](#), the University has advised the student associations of the specific steps they are required to take, either to demonstrate that a breach has not occurred or to remedy the breach. In the interests of fairness and confidentiality, given that the formal process under the Regulation is underway, I am sure you will appreciate that I am unable to comment further.

I also wanted to respond to the messages I have received regarding Minister Dunlop reading the names of students and faculty members during Legislature.

York has been clear that everyone, students, other community members, even the Minister has the right to express political views. While politicians and individual community members can and do engage in politics, the University does not and cannot be seen to take a political stance.

Nevertheless, as I previously indicated to you, I reached out to the Minister to discuss how York University and our community members were being highlighted – and clarified that York would not be deterred from our own processes.

Blue-Ribbon Panel

Now I would like to shift topic to the Blue-Ribbon Panel, which released its recommendations to the Ontario Government on November 15.

You might recall that the provincial government created the Blue-Ribbon Panel comprised of experts for the purpose of providing advice and recommendations for keeping post-secondary education financially stable and for providing a high-quality educational experience for students.

Since March 2023, the panel conducted research and led consultations with key stakeholders. Their work was guided by the principles of enhancing student experience and access; rewarding excellence and financial sustainability; improving labour market alignment; promoting economic growth and prosperity; and keeping education affordable for lower and middle-income families.

In their report, the panel acknowledged the financial pressures facing post-secondary education and identified the factors contributing to the current circumstances – in particular the ongoing cut-and-freeze on tuition and the declining value of per-student grant funding. The panel urged government to act on the recommendations in a bid to restore financial security for Ontario's post-secondary institutions and highlighted the risks of failing to do so for the future of Ontario's economy and workforce.

Some key themes that have been identified were:

- Implementing an integrated funding model (adjustments to the corridor mechanism for operating grants; an increase in Weighted Grant Units and Weighted Funding Units; adjustments to the performance funding model; targeted investments in Northern and French-language institutions; and a multi-year tuition framework). One of the items highlighted was the Tuition Framework. The panel recommended an increase of up to 5% in domestic tuition beginning in 2024; going forward it was recommended tuition rates increase by the greater of 2% or the cost of living.
- A second theme was: Implementing a financial accountability framework so the ministry can monitor the financial health of institutions and flag areas of concern for possible remediation.
- And third, enhancing cost-efficiency and effectiveness through a range of initiatives identified by the Nous Group in order to reduce institutional costs by up to 10%. The panel suggested that further enhancements to automation and digital learning could help institutions meet this

goal in addition to other initiatives.

It's important to note that Minister Dunlop has not yet agreed to the recommendations, nor has she indicated when we can expect to see the implementation of some or all of the recommendations.

Through my work with the Council of Ontario Universities, I continue to strongly advocate for the government to act urgently in implementing these recommendations.

Budget Update

Importantly, the combination of missed international targets over several years with a 10% tuition cut, frozen revenue and inflation are having a significant impact on the University.

We have been working diligently across the University to mitigate these risks through Strategic Enrolment Management (SEM), increasing capacity in high demand programs, strengthening domestic enrolment, improving retention, and seeking efficiencies.

Based on the Fall data for 2023-2024, we expect to exceed our undergraduate Domestic enrolment targets.

Unfortunately, we continue to experience an unexpectedly slow recovery on the international side and expect to miss our undergraduate international enrolment targets by over 1,385 FFTEs (17.4%).

While we had included contingency based on the preceding two years, this shortfall exceeded that amount increasing the projected deficit for 2023/24 by \$18.9M (i.e., from \$67.9M to \$86.8M).

The Provost may want to elaborate on some of the additional factors that worsened our international numbers but they include an increasingly competitive international market in and around Toronto (as well as globally), the delay in visa applications in 2022/23, and various political tensions with China and India.

The new enrolment contracts that have been developed for the 2024-25 budget cycle over the summer and finalized in September have factored in the competitive landscape and the flow-through effects of missed enrolments as of September.

These new revised numbers show a substantial shortfall in tuition revenue of \$30.6M in 2024-25 and \$29.9M in 2025-26 compared to what was in the last board approved budgets which will be reflected in the budgets of the faculties.

While this will not have any impact on the institutional bottom-line, to help the Faculties, we are looking at a redistribution of revenues between the Faculties, Shared Services, and the University Fund by giving a base-budget cut to shared services units and a larger refund to the Faculties on their contribution to the University Fund.

York is not only facing top-line pressures but also bottom-line pressure – specifically the impact of the wage reopeners from Bill124 and high inflation rates which drive higher costs. [Please note that I am not challenging the importance of undertaking the wage reopener discussions but simply pointing out that the Province expected that the decrease in funding for the sector would be partially offset by Bill124. We are now faced with managing the decrease in funding without that mitigation].

Financial sustainability, without jeopardising the quality of the student learning experience, is our top priority. Maintaining that goal will require a combined focus on increasing our revenue and containing our costs.

In order to increase revenue and ensure that our cost containment measures are short-term, we will need to make strategic investments in the areas of global engagement, retention, advancement and research. To address these needs without putting further pressure on our budgets, we are prioritizing these investments and looking at containing other costs.

It can be expected that further expense reduction will need to be done in this upcoming budget cycle to help realign our costs with the lower expected revenue.

Discussions are underway to develop a more comprehensive plan of further actions that the University should explore to help deal with the pressures we are facing and to ensure that we are able to seize new opportunities that will secure our financial sustainability while also supporting our UAP vision and priorities.

The various actions/initiatives that have been raised thus far (including their mention in the Blue-Ribbon Panel Report as well as the various Reports of the Auditor General regarding universities) either for immediate consideration or longer-term planning include:

- **Part 1:** *Streamlining / addressing the number of low enrolled courses*
- **Part 2:** *Assessing financial health of programs*
- **Part 3:** *Faculties of the Future Task Force (to consider whether we have an optimal Faculty-structure to support success)*
- **Part 4:** *Program and Pedagogy Design working group(s) to enhance student success*

- **Part 5:** *Service efficiencies initiative*
- **Part 6:** *Monetization working group*
- **Part 7:** *Other potential initiative(s) emerging from Faculties, budget consultations, APPRC*

Good News

To end my remarks on some good news. I am delighted to share with senators today that not only is York on track to reduce our emissions by 45 per cent by 2030, but that we also announced our aspirations to be net zero by 2040 – ten years sooner than our initial goal.

Last month, York also became the first Canadian institution to compile and release its own ecological footprint and emissions data, allowing for transparent reporting that will enable the University to create data-driven future plans in pursuit of this new goal.

It is a positive, forward-looking step to right the future that requires our entire community to be thinking about the small and big changes we can implement to create a more sustainable planet.

I am really proud of the example that York is setting by getting creative:

- With \$2M from the federal government’s Decarbonization Incentive Program, we will be able to upgrade our Energy Management Information System to efficiently distribute energy and resources based on usage and reduce our emissions on campus.
- A \$1M investment by York for the Sustainability Innovation Fund, launched last year, will catalyze our community in projects that focus on climate mitigation solutions. That call for applications is now open.

This announcement builds on York’s enduring leadership in sustainability and the many examples and initiatives that our community is engaged in to promote sustainability across campus administration and operations, research and innovation, and teaching and learning.

Boosting our efforts in sustainability is not only helping York realize commitments made in our University Academic Plan but is also linked to our global rankings and reputation as a progressive, modern, international teaching and research University.

I want to acknowledge the work carried out by our Vice-Presidents Carol McAulay and Amir Asif, our Chief Sustainability Officer Mike Layton and the members of their teams who have been supporting

the announcement and to all the community members – faculty, staff and students -- who have contributed to the milestones we have reached so far.

Thank you. Merci. Miigwetch.