

The Ontario Council on University Affairs: A Buffer Agency

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The Ontario Minister of Colleges and Universities frequently has cause to consider the views of the Ontario Council on University Affairs (OCUA). OCUA strives to fulfil two roles: to serve the Minister as a continuing source of independent advice on the Ontario university system (in a sense “thinking for the Minister”) and to serve as a buffer between the province’s universities and the provincial government and, sometimes, between the universities themselves.

Ministers are supported as politicians by their political parties in the Legislature and, as ministers, by both personal political staffs and the considerable number of civil servants in their ministries. Besides these sources of expertise, members of the public affected by government actions make representations both to the civil service and to the ministers. Why, then, are other structures such as OCUA needed?

OCUA and its counterparts can be thought of as “buffer agencies”. Parliamentary systems of government such as ours depend on ministerial responsibility and cabinet solidarity. Patrick Beard in his tract, “The Ontario Council on University Affairs: What, Why and How?” (July 1983), has noted that buffer agencies serve to remove from ministerial control, and thus from ministerial responsibility, matters which it is thought best in the public interest (or in the interest of the politicians) to put beyond the reach of day-to-day politics.

The buffer device has been widely used in Canada both federally and provincially. Marketing boards, regulatory agencies, and Crown corporations are a common feature of Canadian public life. While the need for impartiality towards government itself may inspire the creation of some of these bodies, many result from the unwillingness (or inappropriateness) of government to engage in certain activities that the public interest requires be subject to public control. The scope of activities that meet this criterion will vary according to public and political moods.

(Some of the most visible of such bodies are the arts councils at the national or provincial level. Many people believe that decisions on arts

funding should be based on artistic criteria alone. They do not entirely trust politicians as such to be able to apply such criteria because politicians are perceived as lacking expertise and are thought to be susceptible to political pressures to give out money on other grounds.)

In the field of post-secondary education most of the other provinces have intermediary bodies similar in function to OCUA, as do other jurisdictions in the United States and the United Kingdom. Each body, including OCUA, is very much the product of unique political and historical factors in its particular environment and each is subject to pressure by politicians, civil servants and the various interest groups in the universities. OCUA itself is the product of an evolutionary process which began in the 1950s and continues today.

This is a good time for a description of the Council and its work, and for comments on it, as the Council has recently had its five-year "sunset review". Dr. John Stubbs, President of Trent University, completed the review and reported to the Minister in July 1988, in the *Report of the External Advisor to the Minister of Colleges and Universities on the Future Role and Function of the Ontario Council on University Affairs and Its Academic Advisory Committee*. The Minister accepted Dr. Stubbs' recommendations in May 1989, agreeing to a larger research staff and thus a greater policy role for OCUA. This article draws on Dr. Stubb's *Report* and on the previously noted paper by Patrick Beard when he was on the research staff of OCUA.

History

Prior to the 1950s there was no provincial government office or agency with responsibility for government relations with Ontario universities. Such decisions as were required, usually concerning funding, emanated from an informal process involving personal contact among the premier, the university presidents and, sometimes, those chairing the various boards of governors.

In the early 1950s it was perceived that more attention needed to be paid to the universities and Dr. R.C. Wallace, a former Principal of Queen's, was appointed as a part-time consultant to advise the Minister of Education on the co-ordination and funding of their activities. He was succeeded by several other advisors until, in late 1956, an internal and relatively informal government committee was formed consisting of the Provincial Treasurer, the Minister of Education, and senior treasury and education officials. This committee went through several phases until in 1961 the Advisory Committee on University Affairs (ACUA) was formed with, for the first time, some members from outside government (although

not academic members). This was the first effort to provide an impartial buffer that would give the government good and acceptable advice, protect the universities from direct governmental intervention and, incidentally, protect the universities from each other. (In 1962, the universities got together themselves when the university presidents formed the forerunner of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU).)

In 1964 the ACUA added academic representatives. The present OCUA which evolved from the expanded ACUA, dates from 1974, when it was established with 20 members, a secretariat, a full-time chairperson and a policy of publishing specific recommendations together with explicit written arguments, where previously the recommendations only were published and the rationales were left to unpublished minutes.

The chairperson and 19 other members are appointed by order-in-council and are selected from a broad range of interests, sectors and geographic regions in Ontario, with a slight majority appointed from the community at large. The current chairperson, Dr. Vivian Nelles, on leave for three years from York University where he is a professor of history, is the only full-time member of Council. There is also a full-time research staff of six and three administrative support staff—a substantial increase in 1989 from previous years when the staff was about half this size.

Current Activities

OCUA operates in three principal areas:

- (1) Standard areas where advice is expected or offered annually, for example, on funding requirements for the system; allocation of the operating grant; special “envelopes” to individual institutions; and approval of funding for new graduate and undergraduate professional, quasi-professional and special programs (regular undergraduate arts and science programs do not need approval);
- (2) Ministerial references, for example, studies of research overheads; inter-institutional equity; the indirect costs of co-operative education; and, from time to time, the operations of financially troubled institutions;
- (3) Initiatives arising from OCUA’s internal deliberations and requests from the university community or external agencies. In May 1989, for example, OCUA asked institutions, student groups, and other organizations for their opinions on an accessibility policy for Ontario universities in the 1990s, on current tuition-fee levels, and on the needs of part-time and continuing education students. In February 1989 it held hearings on the question of

whether private “universities” should be allowed and empowered to grant degrees. (Currently in Ontario only publicly funded institutions are permitted to use the title “university” and to have unrestricted undergraduate and graduate degree-granting powers.)

Membership

While OCUA members are appointed by order-in-council, nominations are submitted by various organizations and individuals. Even the Ontario universities’ own organization, the Council of Ontario Universities, submits nominations. While individuals may be drawn from certain constituencies, they are not viewed as representatives for those groups and are expected to act from a broad viewpoint. Members serve for a three-year renewable term, usually renewed only once.

Nevertheless, since 1974 there have been some specifically representative aspects to appointments to membership in OCUA:

- a 50/50 split between university and non-university representatives (changing in 1989 to a slight majority from the community at large)
- at least one bilingual member from the University of Ottawa
- at least one member from Northwestern Ontario and one member from Northeastern Ontario
- at least one person from the secondary school sector
- at least one university student.

Accountability

OCUA is accountable to the provincial cabinet through the Minister of Colleges and Universities. This accountability is achieved through the formal process of submitting advisory memoranda containing all of OCUA’s advice to the Minister, who in turn responds formally, sooner or later, to each recommendation. The advice is usually accepted, with the exception of advice on the overall funding level, which has consistently been rejected. The annual report published by OCUA contains all advisory memoranda and reports. In addition there are regular meetings between the chairperson of OCUA and the Minister and senior Ministry officials, occasional meetings of these people with members of Council, and frequent contact by staff of OCUA with staff of the Ministry.

Last year OCUA issued 11 advisory memoranda covering topics such as the allocation of the \$2 billion of operating support funding for the university system in the coming year; a framework for increasing general accessibility to Ontario universities in 1989 and beyond; the mission,

programs and funding for Algoma College; and enhancing access of disabled students to Ontario universities.

Spring Hearings

OCUA may take into account any interests or factors it considers relevant in developing its recommendations. A major source of information and advice is provided through the Council's Spring Hearings, a tradition that goes back to 1967. OCUA travels to a number of university campuses to hold meetings with officials and representatives from the various institutions and organizations for which it has responsibility. Typically, in the winter the chairperson will send a letter to the various university presidents outlining the topics for discussion, the information being requested, and the deadline for written briefs to be received before the hearings.

The hearings themselves are open to the public and the media but rarely draw much interest. Attendance by members of boards of governors is disappointingly rare. As we all focus on the problem of maintaining institutional independence while achieving expected levels of accountability, I believe university board members should become more involved in institutional dealings with OCUA and so gain a greater understanding of, and involvement in, policy issues.

Sub-Committees

Much of the Council's work is undertaken through its subcommittees: Bilingualism and Francophone Affairs, Funding, Institutional Policy, Program, and Student Affairs. A related committee, the Academic Advisory Committee, is composed of seven academics appointed by order-in-council. They are not members of OCUA but advise it from the "outside". This group is broadly representative of university disciplines such as the humanities, life sciences, and social sciences and carries out four major reviews:

- a review of the Council of Ontario Universities' annual compilation of graduate macro indicators;
- a review, from time to time, of the operation and effectiveness of COU's program-quality appraisals;
- a review of the results of COU's appraisals and assessments and of the implications for continued funding of any existing graduate programs; and
- a review of proposals for any new graduate programs as well as undergraduate professional, quasi-professional, and special programs, according to OCUA's criteria.

The committee is something of a “buffer’s buffer”. Some feel it unnecessarily duplicates the work of the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies but it appears from past history that both OCGS and COU occasionally find it impossible to deal as a collectivity with the politically sensitive criteria of need and institutional appropriateness—one of the reasons the AAC was established in 1982.

Interaction with Community Colleges

Sadly for post-secondary education, there has not been much interaction between the Council of Regents of the Ontario community college system and OCUA, reflecting the sharp distinction that has existed in Ontario between the colleges and the universities. The core of that distinction is a legal one, but of course philosophical distinctions are made as well. As Crown agents, the colleges are formally part of the government’s post-secondary educational system while the universities, although also part of that system, are autonomous self-governing institutions.

There are signs that more interaction will take place. The Challenges for the Future conference last year was attended by board, faculty, and administrative representatives from both systems. The chairpersons of OCUA and the Council of Regents are now formally cross-appointed to each other’s boards. In my view much greater interaction is needed—at the local level between colleges and universities, between OCUA and the Council of Regents, and between the college and university sections of the Ministry.

Francophone Education

The Council for Franco-Ontario Education, established in 1980, is responsible for advising the Minister of Education and the Minister of Colleges and Universities on all matters relating to Franco-Ontarian education, while OCUA is responsible for advising on the costs related to the bilingual grant. This division of responsibilities, while technically clear, does lead to misunderstandings in practice, as the francophone community emphasizes French university programming while OCUA stresses bilingual programming. This diversity of views shows the risk of creating parallel buffer bodies that lack authority to resolve disputes between themselves. Ultimately the Minister decides which, if any, to heed, at the risk of losing some of the distance from politics that the buffers were intended to create.

Widespread accessibility to university education has been one of the highest priorities for the Ontario government since the 1960s. Enrolment growth in universities (in recent years the equivalent of two universities

the size of McMaster or Queen's have been added to the permanent enrolment in Ontario) has outstripped the additional funds being made available to the system. This has put under stress OCUA's latest (1987) revision of the formula by which the government allocates money to the universities. These funding formula changes are taking place in a period when it seems post-secondary education will not be able to get all the funds it believes are needed to maintain existing levels of service with respect to existing enrolment, to enhance support for the research infrastructure, to initiate a program of quality improvement, to accommodate more students, and to take new and necessary initiatives.

OCUA's greatest current problem has been understanding the environment and policy priorities in the universities and in the government to come up with a practical new funding formula for 1990-91 and beyond which takes into account recent enrolment growth and which will promote a co-ordinated and planned approach to future enrolment. The Minister accepted proposed revisions in 1989 which it is hoped will be enrolment-sensitive, equitable, and predictable, yet have sufficient annual stability built in to meet the needs of the institutions.

Buffer Leads to Better

With the enthusiastic acceptance of Dr. Stubbs' recommendations by the Minister, the Council has acquired a greater ability to influence policy. The fine group of critical thinkers who make up its membership will not lack issues to consider in addition to offering their regular policy advice. Two interesting issues loom on the horizon: (1) To what extent will public concern for accountability, quality, and effectiveness alter the structure of higher education?; and (2) How are the values of higher education to be asserted and measured if social utility and labour-force criteria are the paramount tests? The Minister will clearly benefit from the Council's independent policy suggestions with regard to these issues as will the university system itself, a system which, I believe, is significantly better because of the work of OCUA.