

Ontarians don't trust government to improve quality of higher education: poll

 theglobeandmail.com/canada/education/article-ontarians-dont-trust-government-to-improve-quality-of-higher

March 20, 2018

Young Ontarians are more concerned than older people about the impact of teaching by part-time university professors, according to a poll released Wednesday by the province's faculty association.

Seventy-one per cent of people between 15 and 17 said they want to see a permanent instructor at the front of the class, compared with 64 per cent of all Ontarians, a result that the group that commissioned the survey says shows support for measures that would improve the working conditions of part-time faculty.

"One of the things that reflects is their own awareness of the job economy they are going into, in addition to increased attention across the province to precarious labour in every sector," said Gyllian Phillips, president of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA).

The poll comes a week before Finance Minister Charles Sousa is set to deliver a pre-election budget that the government has said will further expand access to postsecondary education.

Faculty, university and student groups have lobbied for increased funding in higher education in advance of the budget. In addition, universities are looking to be compensated for what they say are the costs of implementing Bill 148, which mandates that part-time workers must receive pay that is equivalent to that of full-time workers. Implementing the bill could add as much as \$175-million to the budgets of universities, according to the Council of Ontario Universities.

OCUFA would like to see the government follow Bill 148 with a "faculty renewal strategy" that would direct funding into higher education to creating new permanent hires.

"Ontario has the highest student-to-faculty ratio in the country," Dr. Phillips said. "If we wanted to move closer to the national average ... we would need to hire 3,380 full-time professors by 2020," she said.

Some of the Liberal government's highest-profile initiatives have been in higher education. Two years ago, it reorganized the delivery of student financial aid so that it now covers the cost of average tuition for students from families with incomes under \$50,000. It has also mandated that all higher education institutions conduct surveys on the campus climate for sexual violence. The first such survey is taking place this winter.

But according to the new OCUFA survey, those measures are not leading to voter support. Sixty per cent of respondents said they have little or no trust in the Ontario government's ability

to make decisions about the quality of education. Only corporations scored lower on that question, while faculty were trusted by 75 per cent of respondents.

Education does not rank highly among voter concerns in national polls, with health care, unemployment and jobs, taxes and poverty and social inequality all considered higher priorities.

The survey shows, however, that Ontarians are aware of issues in higher education, said Heather Marshall, the president of Mission Research, which conducted the poll of 2,001 respondents.

“If you ask them specifically about issues related to education and the quality of it, we found that almost three in five Ontarians said they are at least somewhat concerned about the quality of education in the province at the moment,” Dr. Marshall said. There is “almost unanimous support for the idea that universities should be a model employer and provide good jobs,” she said.

The poll’s margin of error was 2.2 per cent, 19 times out of 20.