

WUFA's Response to the Strategic Mandate Agreement [SMA]

WUFA offers comments on the process and substance of the administration's draft SMA.

The process is flawed, for several reasons: despite the last-minute nature of the draft template delivered from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development [MAESD], the administration failed to consult widely on its draft response; from WUFA's perspective, after-the-fact consultation [presenting a draft to senate, for instance] is insufficient. Faculty, students, and staff should have been consulted from the beginning — senior administrators knew of this exercise in the autumn — and a consultative committee should have been formed to listen, frame, perhaps even draft the university's SMA. This kind of process would promote a more ecumenical, richer document, and offer 'buy-in,' more engagement, not only in the process but in the ideas and strategies that emerge from the document. Our values demand nothing less than a robust and direct engagement with all constituencies of the university

The substance of the administration's draft SMA is problematic, also for several reasons. First, and perhaps foremost, the document moors excellence in teaching and learning to serving the economy, and especially the local economy, at the expense of most other criteria. As the draft SMA reads:

Our impact on jobs and economic development will only occur if we are innovative in teaching and learning and [in] carrying out relevant research and creative activity. Our ability to create work-place learning opportunities is enhanced if our community is vibrant. [p. 33]

There are at least two concerns here: [1] who describes and defines 'relevant research and creative activity'? and [2] what does 'innovative' mean, in this context but also in the document as a whole? Vacuous buzzwords do little to define, let alone advance, excellence in teaching, creative activity, and inquiry. Are we simply adopting a discourse of 'change and innovation' without actually doing the work of actual change and innovation? An example of the former is the draft SMA's assertions about the 50 new faculty positions: the new positions are a "flagship demonstration" of the university's commitment to teaching and learning, the administration claims; WUFA sees the new positions — one of its proposals during our last round of bargaining — as a restoration of faculty complement to c. 2008 levels. In our view, these positions are not "above complement," as the draft claims [p. 45], and thus do not constitute a "flagship demonstration" to excellence in teaching and learning.

'Change' and 'innovation' are oddly figured in parts of the document. For example, in section 7.3, concerning programme strengths and expansion, the draft [in ways similar to the quotation above, from p. 33] advances a series of arguments about developing and refining academic programmes "on the solid evidence of labour and market demand," and on "the innovative edge of scholarship [?] as well as community and employer needs" [p. 46]. Surely, these are strange ways to decide on university programmes and "curricular efficiency," whatever that might mean: of course, universities must [and always have] responded to the world of which they are part, but we are also institutions that lead and shape that world rather than simply,

apishly reflect employer and market demand.

The quotation above, from p. 33, also evidences another aspect of the draft SMA: it is rather too focussed on the region. In most of the five sections, the University of Windsor's position, geographically [and politically], on the "tip" of Ontario gets significant billing, as does our role in building and sustaining "vibrant communities" [we lost count of the number of times that phrase was used, but see p. 23ff. and pp. 30ff for many examples ...]. Of course, the move to downtown Windsor, including the law school, as well as many other efforts that distinguish our role in the region, are welcome; but we are also scholars and researchers, poets and playwrights, engineers and chemists with international reach [some of this reach is reflected in comments in section 7.2, pp. 41-43, and WUFA agrees that "international student numbers" must be "watched very carefully"]. We are "unique" and distinctive, in part, because of our location, but that in no way exhausts our engagement with the world. This focus is evident in section 5.0, pp. 30ff., too: while the administration claims that the university is "committed to the translation of academic research into value for society," and that this process is qualitative as well as quantitative, all the draft's examples are devoted to industry, intellectual property, and regional issues [p. 31]. Some of the same difficulties are found in section 2.0, on teaching: the draft's comments about experiential learning, 'high impact practices,' and co-operative learning are problematic, as they seek to mould the university according to 'market needs' and employer demands, neither of which should determine — even if they sometimes, in some areas, condition — the intellectual and creative work that we pursue.

Metrics are also worrying, especially with respect to our scholarly, creative, and research activities, and the mechanisms proposed to measure them. The system-wide metrics are deeply problematic — along with tri-council funding, a simple accounting of papers published and number of citations is patently absurd, and hardly a measure of effects and impact [p. 29]. By what tool? what does this rubric fail to capture? and can we measure "research intensity and impact" in ways similar to vexed and contentious processes that have wreaked havoc elsewhere [the research assessment exercise, and its offspring, in the UK]? and how do these provincial metrics figure in the university's new budget model?

This metric riles, as does the fact that measurements of teaching and learning, of our new dedication to HIPs [high-impact practices] and experiential learning, will be evaluated by NSSE alone [p. 17].

We offer these comments in the spirit of a critical perspective on the state of the contemporary comprehensive university. In late 2014, the League of European Research Universities issued what has come to be called 'The Leiden Statement,' a statement that some Canadian institutions signed. It reads, in part:

The humanities and social sciences teach us how to understand, interpret, and respect our commonalities and our differences. Because increased interconnectedness brings increased cultural, social, and economic tensions, a peaceful and sustainable future based on successful economic and societal development requires an awareness of different perspectives and an understanding of diverse cultures, histories, and social institutions. Mutual understanding can

foster the respect necessary for a peaceful and stable world order in which economic and societal progress is possible. ...

The Leiden document “champions” the “fundamental role that the social sciences and humanities play in the new global community,” and it calls for “an expanded role for the social sciences and humanities in tackling problems through interdisciplinary research.”

Our response to the SMA embodies these principles — not because we do not value the work of our colleagues in science and technology, engineering, medicine, and mathematics, but because nowhere in the draft SMA is our work explicitly defended for its critical and intellectual value: the document’s sometimes platitudinous justifications leave little room to articulate the value of the arts, humanities, and social sciences in a comprehensive university such as ours. The work of scholars in these disciplines produces critical-mindedness, the capacity to detect and reveal contradictions between principles and practices, the abilities to understand the actuality of perspectives other than our own and to communicate across differences, and the means to produce new ways of reading, seeing, and listening. The arts, humanities, and social sciences develop and refine sometimes controversial ideas, and often advance visions and conceptions of society at odds with reigning ideologies and hegemonies. Although they are implied occasionally in the draft SMA [see p. 27, for example], these values, and the disciplines that advance them, should be made more explicit in the final iteration of this document.

Yet WUFA applauds the administration for its local responses, in the following [somewhat awkward, infelicitous] assertion:

Every Academic unit will have a statement about how they assess their collective research and creative activity and will establish a mechanism for maintaining a way of measuring research intensity and impact within their own departments. [p. 29]

This is good for departmental autonomy but, like some other proposals in the draft SMA, it might have implications for workload, as all the reporting mechanisms are bound to increase staff and faculty workloads across the entire sector. As OCUFA has pointed out, in future the SMAs could have serious effects on terms and conditions of work.

A few minor points about the document:

- WUFA wonders about the new “President’s Program Development Incentive Fund,” being established, the draft notes, “to provide to faculties for program updates, makeovers [??], and innovations” [p. 45].
- WUFA should be given shared credit for advancing the creation of five new faculty positions devoted to “Aboriginal scholars across a range of disciplines” as a solution to a policy grievance [p.20]
- the draft should mention SWORP, the Schulich-UWindsor Opportunities for Research Excellence Programme, at pp. 50-51
- nowhere is the very successful FAHSS mentorship programme, important to the dean’s office

and to programmes like history, mentioned

Finally, one of the more welcome statements in the draft SMA recognises the difficulties, the inflexibilities, that metrics and measurements necessarily court. WUFA endorses this statement:

The University of Windsor also feels strongly that metrics about these five priorities should not come with the assumption that as soon as you start measuring something it must forever increase or else you will be judged as not succeeding. Our university has always been innovating and changing, and making progress wherever it can, but it is unrealistic to think that certain metrics can forever increase. We would hope that doing what we do well, and doing it year in and year out, would be valued. [p. 36].

WUFA shares that hope: whatever we understand as innovation — from the Latin *innovare*, ‘to renew or restore’ — we note that faculty are the experts in their fields, know how to judge and evaluate their peers, and must retain their autonomy. We should not be beholden to ‘marked demands’ and ‘employer needs’ alone, but to the ways in which our disciplines, from the humanities to the sciences, seek to produce, critique, and refine knowledge free from interference, free from stilted forms of measurement, and free from administrative or governmental fiat. WUFA has a general concern about the ways in which the current provincial government is shaping the university sector by a limited — temporally and intellectually — set of ‘job-ready,’ ‘real world’ criteria; we are concerned, too, that not only individual departments and faculties, as well as faculty members, retain their autonomy, and this point applies to the post-secondary system as a whole. The imposition of metrics, of funding contingent on measuring outcomes, is a policy that, in the long run, endangers the independence and academic freedom of our members and our members’ institutions.