

UPEI at a crossroads

University pays for VPs, legal fees and Cairo campus while faculty numbers decrease

BILL WHELAN COMMENTARY

As a UPEI faculty member, a UPEI alumnus and donor, and the proud father of a UPEI graduate, I am deeply concerned about the ongoing 10 months of contract negotiations between the UPEI Faculty Association (UPEIFA) and the board of governors, recently reported in *The Guardian*. I am sure some Islanders are wondering how we got to this point.

BUDGET INCREASES

A key negotiation issue is the need for more resources and supports for teaching and research. According to UPEI data, from 2012-2021, the university's operating budget increased 36 per cent, full-time student enrolment increased 26 per cent and the cost of tuition increased 30 per cent. In the same period, the number of full-time faculty (permanent and on term contract) who plan, develop and deliver the courses and programs decreased 1 per cent. This has resulted in increased workloads for faculty, and limits the time faculty can meet with, supervise, mentor and advise individual

students. This also limits the time faculty have to maintain their scholarly, research and creative activities, which are of critical importance to UPEI's reputation.

With such increases in the university's operating budget and student enrolments over the past decade, why haven't more full-time faculty been hired?

It doesn't appear to be a lack of financial resources. For example, since 2013 the number of vice-presidents and deans at UPEI has increased by 42 per cent. In 2018, UPEI's administration established a campus in Cairo, Egypt (<https://upei.uofcanada.edu.eg>), where programs in engineering, business, and computer science are being delivered. UPEI's consolidated financial statements (2021) do not identify revenues or expenditures specific to this new campus, so it is difficult to assess the financial implications of the Cairo campus.

WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

UPEI is also currently incurring legal fees for an ongoing independent third-party review of the university's policies and practices concerning

The Guardian
February 7, 2023. p. A09



No documentation or business case was provided to UPEI faculty members in the senate prior to a vote on the university's proposed medical school, writes Bill Whelan. **CONTRIBUTED**

workplace harassment and discrimination, and for the board's chief negotiator in this current round of collective bargaining.

To provide some context, UPEI funds from its operating budget a total of five undergraduate students annually to work full-time with a faculty member on a research project over the summer. The legal fees, this year alone, could fund more than 100 of these undergraduate research assistant positions, providing students with world-class research experiences and faculty with needed research support.

The latest available UPEI data (2020-2021) show that 26 per cent of all courses delivered were taught by contract academic staff (known as sessional instructors and term faculty). Sessional instructors are paid much less per course than permanent faculty and they have no job security, no benefits and no real opportunity to advance to a permanent position.

Sessional instructors have no guaranteed office space to meet with students, no say in university decision-making, and are not being paid to con-

tribute to the many university committees or to conduct research. According to this data, in 2020-2021, 53 per cent of the academic staff at UPEI were on contract. The university's over-reliance on precarious contract employment is a concern.

MEDICAL SCHOOL

Another concern is the limited ability for academic staff at UPEI to fully participate in major decisions that affect the entire university.

A recent example is the establishment of the UPEI faculty of medicine in 2021 where no documentation or business case was provided to faculty members in the senate prior to a vote.

This is not unique to UPEI. This is a trend observed by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (www.caut.ca) that "Decision-making powers are concentrated in the hands of a few – who act behind closed doors – while the voices of academic staff and other key stakeholders are being weakened or silenced."

In my opinion, this acts to erode trust and collegiality

among the faculty, administration and community, and as such, weakens the entire university.

MORE TRANSPARENCY

We all want UPEI to succeed and, as a faculty member, I want our students to receive the highest quality education possible. But for this to happen, change is needed.

Our university has been at a crossroads now for just over a year, following the sudden departure of the former president.

The path forward will require prioritizing more resources for teaching and research, greater mutual trust among the administration and faculty, and greater collaboration, transparency and accountability in university decision-making.

It won't be easy. It will require effort from all sides, but our students are most certainly worth the effort.

Bill Whelan is a UPEI faculty member, former department chair, past Canada Research Chair, a UPEI alumnus and donor, and the proud father of a UPEI graduate.