

# Working and learning conditions

## UPEI students confronted with ever-larger classes, longer waiting lists

**RICHARD RAISWELL**  
COMMENTARY

Since negotiations for a new contract with UPEI administration began 10 months ago, the faculty association's slogan has been "Our working conditions are students' learning conditions." This isn't empty rhetoric.

I teach in the history department. We have 85 courses listed in the course calendar — this is the document that prospective students view before they decide to come to UPEI. And we look good: our offerings are broad and diverse, and provide students with perspective on the origins of many contemporary issues.

This year, though, we were able to offer just 30 of those courses. This is typical — in any given year we can't offer two-thirds of what we have on the books because we just don't have the faculty or the resources. Student enrolment in history is strong — so what we see every year is larger classes, long waiting lists and students scrambling to meet programme requirements.

### RETIREMENTS LOOM

And it looks like this situation will get worse.

Our American historian is slated to retire at the end of this academic year. American history is a vital subfield — and it's important for Canadians to know about the history of our closest ally and largest trading partner. The department applied to be permitted to hire a replacement back in November, but we have yet to be told whether this will be possible — despite the fact that advertisements for new faculty positions are usually posted in January. So it looks like we'll be adding another 10 courses to that not-offered list next year. Over the next few years, it is likely that the department will see another couple of retirements, too — and if they're not replaced, tack on another 20-or-so courses to that list.

Personally, I have 15 courses on my teaching roster. Some of these are program requirements; others are essential for students interested in pursuing advanced studies in European history. But I simply can't rotate my

course offerings frequently enough to ensure that all of our students get a chance to take what they need and what they think will be useful to them.

My experience is not unusual across my faculty. But the problems run deeper than this.

### GHOST COURSES

Beyond courses that are rarely offered, we have ghost programs on the books — programs in which no one teaches and no courses are ever offered.

All of this is because UPEI's senior administration has hollowed out programs and faculties over the years, redirecting resources out of the classroom towards non-academic priorities. But the money's there: over the last 10 years, full-time student enrolment has increased 26 per cent and the cost of tuition has gone up 30 per cent. In total, the university's operating budget is up 36 per cent.

Despite the fact that there are not enough full-time faculty to carry out the primary

mission of the university — providing world-class education to Island students — administration refuses to commit to any proposal that would fix a maximum ratio of students to faculty.

So it looks like their vision of the university centres on ever-larger classes and longer waiting lists.

### HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Faculty love their work — it is wonderful to talk to bright students, mentoring them towards their aspirations. But we need proper administrative support. What we have instead is a hostile work environment. In the wake of the sudden departure of the university's last president in December 2021 after allegations of workplace misconduct surfaced, administration was forced to commit to an investigation of the culture of harassment and discrimination across campus. Many faculty and staff spent long sessions with investigators documenting the toxic culture at the university. Predictably, of course, more than a year after this work was commissioned,

and the investigation completed, this report has yet to be made public.

But this is what we're dealing with at UPEI: ballooning class sizes; reduced course offerings; hollowed out programs; a culture of harassment, intimidation and secrecy; and an administration that squanders student and public money fomenting antagonism with the people who actually do the university's work.

But most crucially, we're dealing with anxious students — many of whom had been enjoying their first full year in the classroom after COVID — worried about the quality of their education.

It's time to fix this.

It's time for UPEI's senior administration to take seriously what it means to run a university — and to put students' learning conditions first by committing to support faculty, and the courses and programmes they run.

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