

# Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages for Its Study on Federal Support for French or Bilingual Post- Secondary Institutions in a Minority Situation

June 2021

Ottawa, June 30, 2021

**Emmanuel Dubourg**

Chair, Standing Committee on Official Languages  
Member of Parliament for Bourassa  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. Dubourg:

**Subject: AFO brief to the Standing Committee on Official Languages for its study on federal support for French or bilingual post-secondary institutions in a minority situation**

On behalf of the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario (AFO) and the 744,000 Franco-Ontarians it represents, I would like to thank you and the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages for studying the critical issue of French-language post-secondary education in francophone minority communities. Ontario's university community is undergoing major changes with the opening of the Université de l'Ontario français (UOF), the granting of a charter to the Université de Hearst (UH) and the turmoil in the Mid-North.

Post-secondary education is essential to Franco-Ontarians' language continuum. In today's world, post-secondary education is a necessity. To ensure the development of our community, francophones need access to high-quality post-secondary education in their language. Franco-Ontarians have been seeking university governance for over 50 years in an effort to gain improved access to French-language programs.

In 2012, the French Language Services Commissioner conducted an investigation in response to multiple complaints about the lack of French-language post-secondary education in Central-Southwestern Ontario. The study ended in 2012 with the release of an investigation report titled *The State of French-Language Postsecondary Education in Central-Southwestern Ontario: No access, no future.*<sup>1</sup> The report recommended creating a French-language university in the region.

In 2013, the Regroupement des étudiants franco-ontariens (RÉFO), in partnership with the AFO and the Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne, organized the [États généraux sur le postsecondaire en Ontario français](#) [in French only]. This extensive consultation process gave Franco-Ontarians the opportunity to share their opinions and vision for French-language post-secondary education in Ontario. An [initial report on the États généraux regional and youth consultations](#) [in French only] was published

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<sup>1</sup> [https://csfontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/FLSC\\_FrenchPostsecondaryEducation.pdf](https://csfontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/FLSC_FrenchPostsecondaryEducation.pdf)

in the fall of 2013,<sup>2</sup> followed by a report on the [provincial summit of the États généraux](#) [in French only] in October 2014.<sup>3</sup>

After many years of hard work and advocacy by the Franco-Ontarian community, the UOF project became a reality when the university was chartered on December 14, 2017. After briefly being cancelled by the Ontario government, a funding agreement was signed by the federal and provincial governments in January 2020. The UOF will open its doors in September 2021.

It is, however, important to note that the UOF is no longer the only university “by and for” francophones with a charter. After over 50 years affiliated with Laurentian University, the UdeH obtained its charter in June 2021, with the enactment of the *Supporting Recovery and Competitiveness Act, 2021*.

With the exception of the University of Ottawa, French and bilingual universities are struggling with financial difficulties and a pandemic that was particularly challenging for small and medium-sized universities. We are quite familiar with this struggle, being in frequent contact with executives at French and bilingual post-secondary institutions.

Furthermore, colleges and universities have experienced a drop in revenues as a result of the Ontario government’s decision to lower tuition fees by 10% and then freeze them at the college level. In addition, provincial funding for colleges has been frozen for over 15 years. As for federal funding, the Official Languages Support Programs have not grown significantly since the beginning of the century.

The most obvious and current example of this financial struggle is Laurentian University. On February 1, Laurentian University announced a court-supervised restructuring pursuant to the *Companies’ Creditors Arrangement Act*. This was a first for a Canadian post-secondary institution. Two months later, Laurentian unilaterally decided to terminate its federation agreement with three universities, threatening their survival and the education of students at the University of Sudbury.

### **Laurentian University**

The Franco-Ontarian community no longer trusts Laurentian—and with good reason! The April 14 cuts and the unilateral decision to terminate the federation agreement were in a sense the final nails in the coffin, but Laurentian’s disregard for French began long before May 1.

Since the turn of the century, Laurentian has invested very little in its French-language programming, and francophones have struggled to be heard. Since 2000, Laurentian created 26 new English-language programs but only five new French-language programs.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://etatsgeneraux.ca/resources/Rapport%20des%20consultations%20de%20l'automne%202013%20-%20C3%89tats%20g%C3%A9n%C3%A9raux%20sur%20le%20postsecondaire%20en%20Ontario%20fran%C3%A7ais.pdf> [in French only]

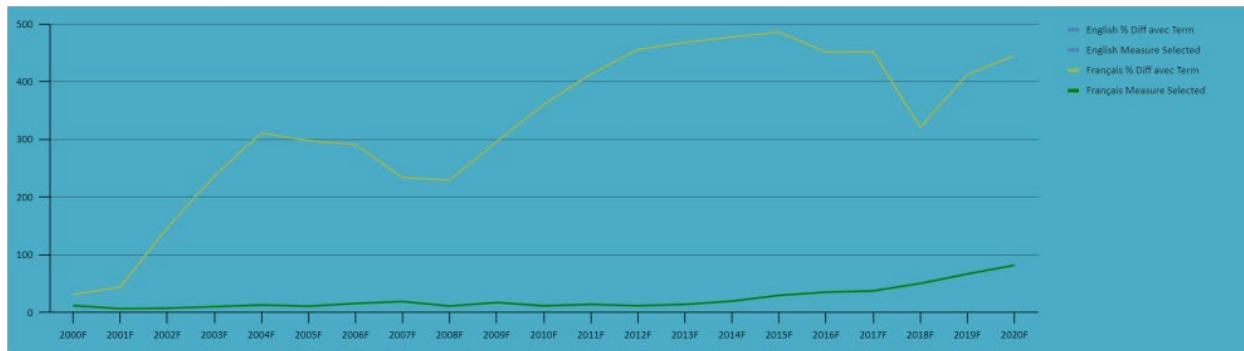
<sup>3</sup> <http://etatsgeneraux.ca/resources/Rapport%20du%20Sommet%20provincial%20des%20C3%89tats%20g%C3%A9n%C3%A9raux%20sur%20le%20postsecondaire%20en%20Ontario%20fran%C3%A7ais.pdf> [in French only]

## New Programs at Laurentian University Since 2000

Level	New Programs (English)	New Programs (French)
<b>Undergraduate</b>	Architecture (2013) Business Administration (2004) Criminology (2016) Earth Sciences (2003) Ecology (2003) Equity, Diversity, and Human Rights (2018) Pharmaceutical Chemistry (2008) Radiation Therapy (2003)	Criminology (2019) French Literature and Culture (2018) Speech-Language Pathology (2008) Midwifery (2004)
<b>Master's</b>	Architecture (2017) Engineering Science (2019) Indigenous Relations (2015) Interdisciplinary Health (2014) MBA (CGA) (2004) MBA (2015) Science Communication (2015)	Speech-Language pathology (2014)
<b>Doctoral</b>	Mineral Deposits and Precambrian Geology (2005) Boreal Ecology (2005) Biomolecular Science (2005) Natural Resource Engineering (2004) Materials Science (2011) Rural and Northern Health (2008)	
<b>New programs within existing fields</b>	Forensic Identification (2004) Forensic Science (2004) Applied Psychology (2004) Experimental Psychology (2004) Computer Science (2014)	

Furthermore, Laurentian invests very little in international student recruitment for its French programs. Laurentian attracted over 100 international students for its English programs every year between 2002 and 2009 and 300 to 500 students every year after that, yet the institution still has not had 100 international students in a year for its French programs. Despite rising enrolment for these programs since 2015, attributable in part to the new staff position responsible for recruiting francophone international students, the position was eliminated in the last round of budget cuts.

## International Students Enrolled at Laurentian University (English and French programs)



On April 12, Laurentian announced massive cutbacks, including 48% of French-language programs. The English side was also affected, losing about 20% of its programs. Yet, once again, the Franco-Ontarian community paid the higher price.

Despite these dark times, there is still a way to save French-language university education in the Mid-North that has the Franco-Ontarian community's support: make the University of Sudbury governed by, for and with francophones. Since the institution announced its desire to become entirely French on March 12, 2021, the Franco-Ontarian community has thrown its support behind the project. Franco-Ontarians mobilized and wrote 3,000 letters to Laurentian's president asking for the French-language programs to be transferred to the University of Sudbury.

This transformation of French post-secondary education in the Mid-North would be in line with the institution's francophone roots. Founded in 1913 as the Collège Sacré-Cœur in response to *Instruction 17*, the University of Sudbury was mostly French for many decades, until the creation of the Laurentian Federation. This solution aligns with the Franco-Ontarian community's main historical demand regarding post-secondary education: institutions run by, for and with francophones. It is also a viable option and is likely to successfully integrate with and complement Ontario's French-language system.

Most importantly, the Franco-Ontarian community strongly supports this solution. It is endorsed not only by the AFO, but also by the northern community leadership, the francophone professors at Laurentian, over 400 francophone professors across Canada and the Franco-Ontarian community through the États généraux. Furthermore, 3,000 people wrote letters to Laurentian's president and vice-chancellor and the chair of its board of governors asking for the straightforward transfer of all of Laurentian's French-language programs to the University of Sudbury.

This issue is mostly provincial in nature, but we are happy to see that the federal government is aware of its role in helping the University of Sudbury make changes, as it did with the creation of new French post-secondary institutions outside of Quebec.

#### **Recommendation 1**

That the government of Canada:

- provide financial support to the University of Sudbury during its transformation through a Canada–Ontario agreement; and
- promptly redirect federal official languages funding originally meant for Laurentian to the University of Sudbury.

#### **Accountability**

The federal and provincial governments have invested significant sums in our institutions for minority French-language education. We are certain that this money is used for French-language programming and infrastructure at institutions run by, for and with francophones, but do not have the same faith in bilingual universities. Unfortunately, there are no accountability measures in place. The community cannot know whether the government official languages funding provided to bilingual institutions is spent on French programs and services.

In Bill C-32, An Act to Amend the Official Languages Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts, the federal government seems to seek to strengthen accountability in its official languages funding agreements. We support this goal and believe accountability measures are necessary for the community's well-being. We cannot go on being unsure whether bilingual universities such as Laurentian University are using their official languages funding for French programs and services.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That the federal government include accountability mechanisms in its official languages funding agreements with bilingual institutions to ensure complete transparency regarding government funding in this type of envelope.

#### **French-language post-secondary network**

Collaboration with other French post-secondary institutions should also be a priority. Currently, our institutions are focused on staying competitive and keeping their heads above water. The University of Ottawa is the only French or bilingual university in Canada to report being in good shape. These institutions need to collaborate more in order to better serve those whom they exist to serve: their students.

In Ontario, many stakeholders have expressed interest in creating and enhancing a Franco-Ontarian post-secondary network. Given the existence of two—potentially three—universities run by, for and with francophones and two French-language colleges with campuses in the four corners of the province, this initiative is very promising. Members of this network could also partner with post-secondary institutions in the rest of Canada, including Quebec.

An Ontario and national network built through partnerships negotiated among equals by independent institutions would bode well for the survival and growth of post-secondary education in Ontario and the broadening of programs offered in French. This network would obviously be far stronger if it included a university governed and managed by, for and with francophones in Mid-North Ontario. To build a strong and effective francophone network, we need strong francophone institutions, and Laurentian University no longer fits that description. This kind of network could aim to develop certain programs and services, among other things.

This is also an opportunity to study existing partnerships to see what practices work and how to adapt them. An example is the partnership between the UOF, UdeH and La Cité. The Collège Boréal is developing narrow partnerships and increasingly predictable student mobility options with Saint Paul University in Toronto and Ottawa. Boréal is considered the college partner of choice for the UOF in the Mid-North, and very preliminary discussions to that end have taken place with the institution's new president. Some of current best practices could benefit all our institutions.

We also tip our hats to the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne and the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadiennes for organizing the États généraux sur le postsecondaire de la langue française au Canada.

### **Recommendation 3**

That, within its jurisdiction, the federal government encourage collaboration and partnerships between French-language post-secondary institutions.

The Franco-Ontarian community believes that governance “by, for and with” is an essential tool for its vitality and development. Our community has already proven itself many times in terms of “by and for” education with its school boards and La Cité and Boréal colleges. The federal government must act to secure the future of French-language post-secondary education because, in the absence of a strong French continuum, the Franco-Ontarian community cannot continue to flourish.

Thank you for your attention to this brief.

Sincerely,

[signed]

Carol Jolin  
President, Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario