

Ontario university faculty sound warning over declining quality

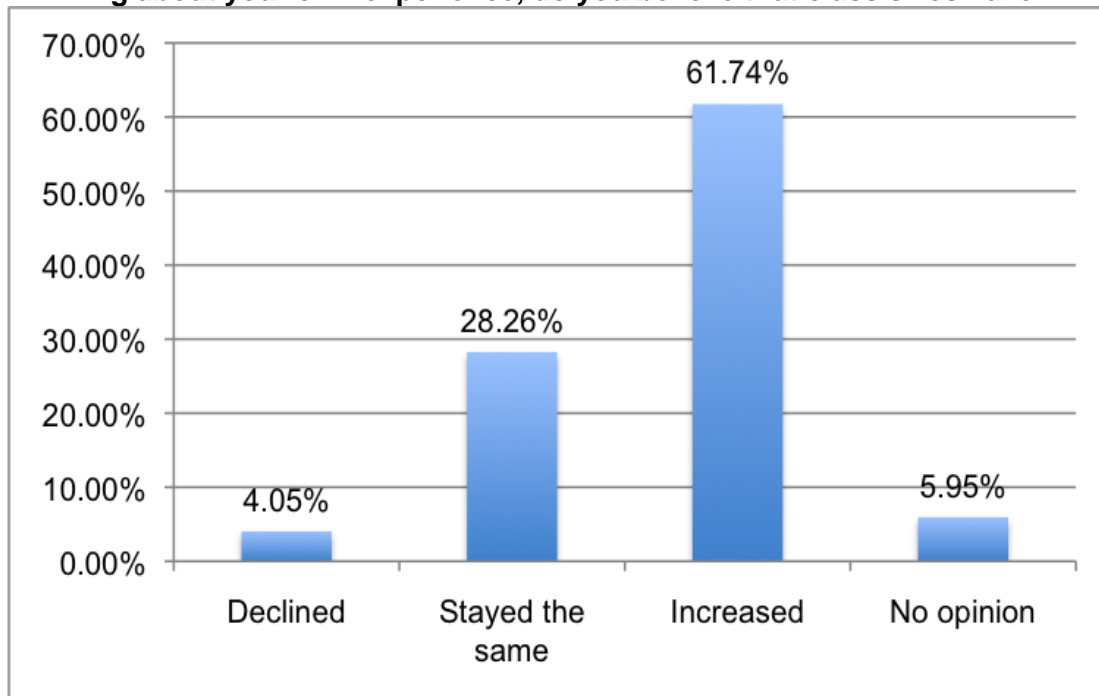
The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations invited Ontario university faculty and librarians to respond to an on-line questionnaire. The questionnaire asked about a range of issues including class size, faculty hiring, research capacity, departmental budgets, and the overall quality of education being delivered to students. Close to 2,000 responses from 22 Ontario universities were received between February 16 and March 13, 2009.

Key Findings

Class Size Changes

Class size is one of the most commonly used quality measures in postsecondary education. Smaller classes generally signal that students' will have a greater chance to interact with faculty than in larger classes.

Thinking about your own experience, do you believe that class sizes have:



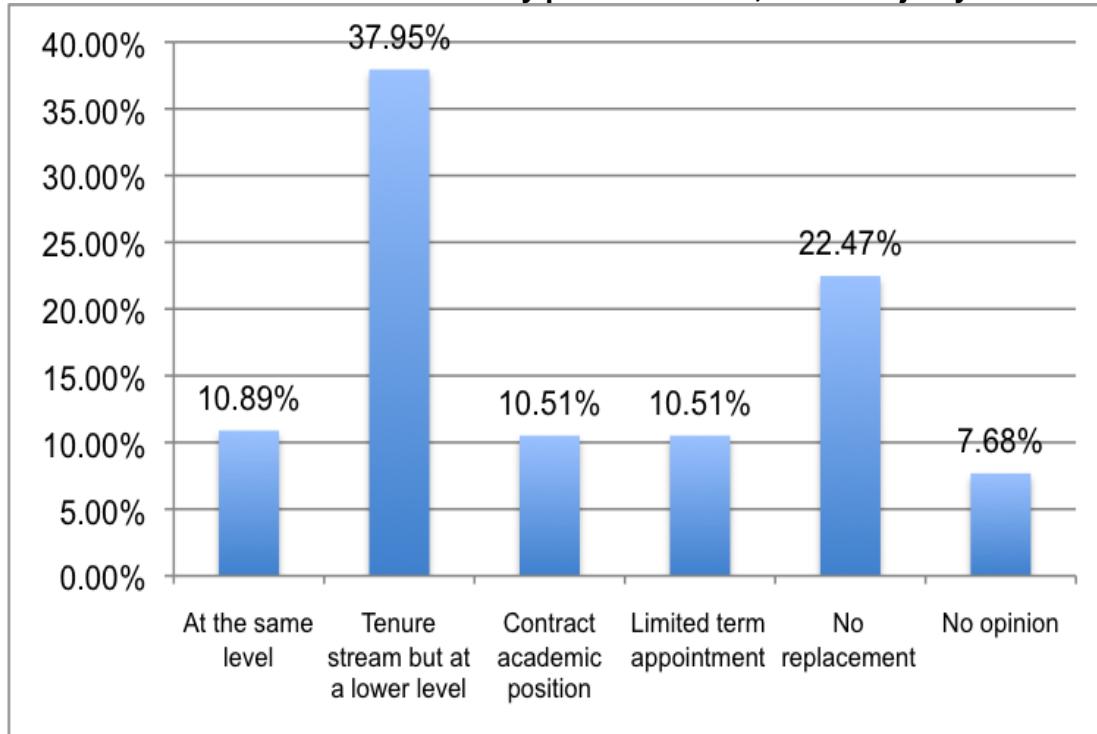
Sixty-two per cent of respondents said that they are facing larger classes than they were just three years ago.

Of those respondents reporting an increase in class size, the anecdotal evidence provided shows a clear pattern of increased enrolment but not enough faculty hiring to keep up with demand.

Hiring of replacement for full-time tenured faculty

Ontario university faculty are retiring in large numbers as faculty hired during the expansion of the late 1960s / early 1970s are reaching retirement age.

Thinking about your own department over the past three years, a replacement hire has been made for a tenure-stream faculty position that is, in the majority of cases:



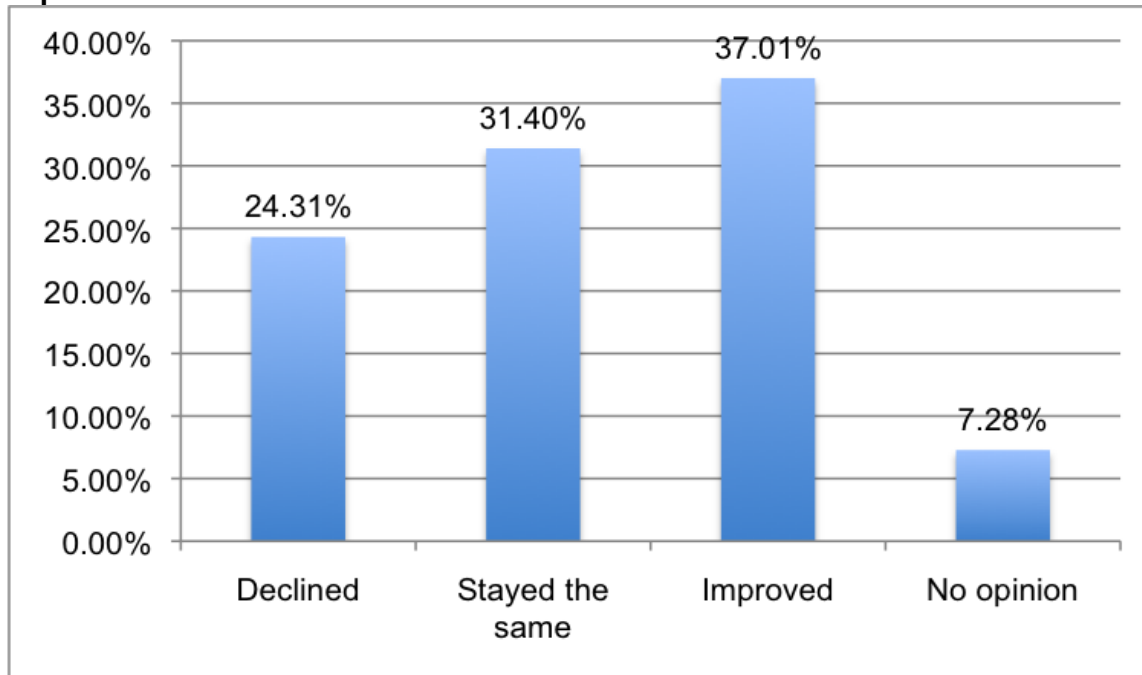
Twenty-two per cent of respondents claim that no replacements are being hired to replace full-time faculty.

These findings point to a reduction in full-time faculty hiring practices at Ontario universities. Full-time faculty are only being replaced with a comparable full-time hire in less than 60% of cases. Universities are relying on contract or part-time faculty or enacting hiring freezes while enrolments continue to increase.

Changes in Research Capacity

For respondents, there was a more positive view of changes in research capacity.

Thinking about the last three years, do you believe that the research capacity in your department has:



Thirty-seven per cent of respondents reported an improvement in research capacity over the past three years.

Respondents most often cited the expanding pool of research funding as the reason for their positive view of research capacity. However, respondents expressed concern over declining institutional support in terms of the number of faculty available to conduct research.

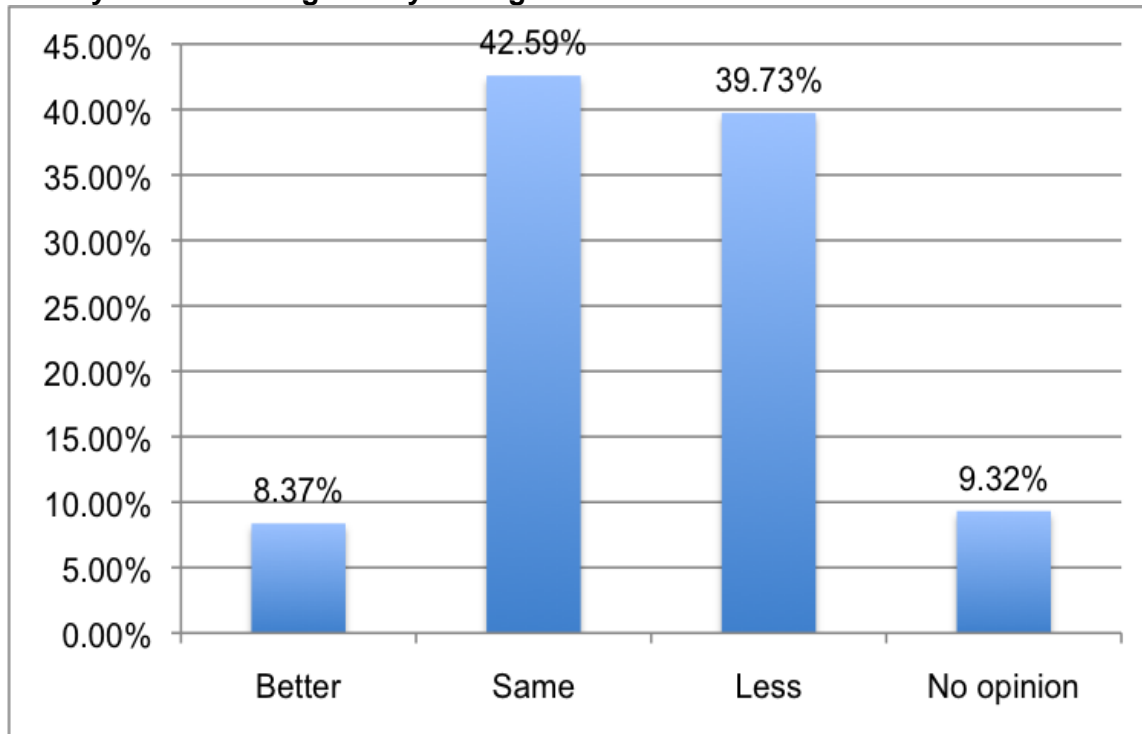
In addition, thirty-five per cent of respondents believe that there has been an improvement or slight improvement in the support of graduate studies over the past three years.

These results for research and graduate studies present a sharp contrast to the perception of changes in undergraduate education. Despite the more positive results for research and graduate education, the overall quality of the educational experience is regarded to be in decline.

Quality of education compared with three years ago

There is strong consensus that Ontario universities must deliver quality education to ensure that we maintain a strong teaching, research, learning environments that will help prepare its graduates for the knowledge economy.

Are undergraduate and graduate students receiving the same quality of education today as they were receiving three years ago?



Forty per cent of respondents believe that today's students are receiving less educational quality than three years ago.

Despite the claim of large-scale investment in university education, faculty respondents are pessimistic about the quality of education being delivered at Ontario universities.

Looking at examples provided by respondents, larger classes are cited by respondents as the most visible and consistent example of erosion in quality.

Respondents illustrated the impact of larger classes on quality as being:

- Oversubscribed courses without enough seats for students
- Larger classes replacing seminars during the third and fourth year of undergraduate study
- Classes formerly taught by faculty are closed and folded into other classes when faculty member retires
- Less student - faculty interaction

- Fewer labs and individualized assignments – greater emphasis on multiple choice assignments to ease marking workload

Faculty across the province and across all disciplines have clearly voiced their concern over the deterioration of quality in the province's universities. The continued neglect of our universities through swelling classes, detrimental hiring practices, and deteriorating facilities will prove disastrous to our province's ability to provide quality education and deliver a strong research capacity.